American Federation of Teachers
NJ State Federation,

NJ State Conference of the American Association of University Professors,

Health Professionals and Allied Employees:

Analysis and Response to the Kean Commission Task Force Report

May 28, 2011

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AFT NJ State Federation, NJ State Conference of the American Association of University Professors and HPAE: Analysis and Response to the Kean Commission Task Force Report

Executive Summary

The New Jersey Higher Education Task Force Report should be the beginning of a broad policy discussion on the future of higher education in the State.

As representatives of over 30,000 higher education faculty and staff, the AFT-NJ State Federation, the NJ Conference of the AAUP and the HPAE take exception to many of the conclusions of the Task Force Report.

- The Task Force Report is self-serving. It is written by presidents and board members for presidents and board members.
- The Task Force Report incomprehensively argues for both, more public support for higher education and, at the same time, less public accountability. It wants to eliminate tuition caps as a means of controlling the alarming increase in tuition costs.
- The Task Force Report dismisses as a myth the costs of duplicate and disparate programs and systems across institutions of higher education, while the State of New Jersey is going in exactly the opposite direction—streamlining and sharing services and systems to save costs.

In contrast to the Task Force Report, the AFT-NJ State Federation, NJ Conference of the AAUP and HPAE believe that:

- Publically supported higher education must be publically accountable. P.L. 2009, c. 308 (Senate 1609) needs to be enforced to assure accountability.
- The Commission on Higher education should be strengthened not eliminated, and that specific standards of accountability need to be established and enforced at each institution.
- The State must continue to promote a unified statewide system of public higher education and negotiations, and not an "every person for his/her-self" free-for-all recommended by the Task Force.
- Significant cost savings exist in utilization of uniform policies, standard systems, and shared services and resources throughout the Higher education system.
- Faculty, staff, students, and all affected communities must be participants in any discussions of higher education reorganization.

Recommendation:

The AFT-NJ State Federation, the NJ Conference of the AAUP and the HPAE urge the State Legislature to delay action on the Task Force recommendations and to immediately conduct public hearings on the future, mission, funding, affordability, access, and governance of public higher education in the State of New Jersey.

Comparative Tabular Summary of the Kean Commission Task Force and the Higher Education Labor Recommendations

Kean Commission Task Force Recommendations	Higher Education Labor Recommendations
1. Eliminate the Commission on Higher Education	1. Establish accountability by strengthening the Commission on Higher Education
2. Establish greater institutional autonomy	2. Restore accountability, transparency and oversight
3. Support BOT initiated trustee nominations (exception: Rutgers) Red Tape Review Commission	3. Establish public involvement in BOT selections; BOT's should include 2 employees chosen by each campus employee union (Support Bill A392)
4. Accept Presidents' Council's Regulatory Relief and Unfunded Mandates Report	4. Reject unfunded mandates
5. Support Governor Christie's Tool- Kit bills to reform workers compensation, collective bargaining and civil service at State colleges and universities	5. Protect sound governance and the public interest and welfare of employees
6. Authorize State colleges and universities to conduct collective bargaining	6. Maintain current collective bargaining procedures and civil service at the State colleges and universities; Reject Bills S-2026/A2963; S-2388/A3220; S-2027 and A-2962
7. Maintain current practice providing "mission differentiation"; little evidence found of needless duplication of programs	7. Provide needs assessments on a regular basis in collaboration with regional colleges and universities, faculty, students and the community for setting priorities and allocating resources
8. No tuition cap on Rutgers and senior public colleges and universities	8. Maintain tuition caps
9. Support State provided greater financial support for the operating budgets of State colleges and universities	9. Support the Task Force recommendation, but note the lack of cost saving recommendations for the State universities and colleges (e.g. debt service and excessive managerial positions and salaries)
10. Support State funded increases in salaries minimally at the level of any increases in salaries negotiated with State employees	10. Support the Task Force recommendation, but note the lack of cost saving recommendations for the State universities and colleges (e.g. debt service and excessive managerial positions and salaries)

AFT NJ State Federation, NJ State Conference of the American Association of University Professors and HPAE:
Analysis and Response to the Kean Commission Task Force Report

The New Jersey Higher Education Task Force Report to the Governor, issued on January 4, 2011, is fatally flawed. It is written purely from the perspective of the boards of trustees and State college/university presidents. There was no attempt to elicit the views of the employees—faculty, librarians or professional staff- who struggle to make higher education work in New Jersey despite the lack of resources and funding. No higher education union representatives were asked for input. Therefore, as the representatives of 30,000 State college/university faculty, librarians and professional staff at the State's public colleges/universities, it is our responsibility to provide an alternative vision and provide information on student success in higher education and exploring student attitudes, both of which are missing from the Kean Report. What follows are Task Force recommendations and/or concerns in ***italics***, followed by our response with some of our suggestions and recommendations.

We have also included three appendices: I. Differences between the Governor's New Jersey Higher Education Task Force recommendations and P.L. 2009, c. 308 (S-1609); II. Student Success in Higher Education and III. Exploring Student Attitudes, Aspirations and Barriers to Success.

STATEWIDE COORDINATION

Task Force Recommendation: The Commission on Higher Education should be eliminated and replaced with a Secretary of Higher Education and a new Governor's Higher Education Council. A Secretary of Higher Education and a new advisory Governor's Higher Education Council should stand at the center of the new structure.

The Report proposes to eliminate the Commission on Higher Education and replace it with a Secretary of Higher Education who would appoint a Governor's Higher Education Council comprised of five members chosen by the Governor. Its authority over the State colleges/universities would be limited to intervening in cases of dire "financial difficulty, fraud or gross mismanagement." In effect, this is a major retreat from S-1609, the bill signed into law in early 2010 as PL 2009, Chapter 308, passed in response to 2007 State Commission of Investigation Report, "*Vulnerable to Abuse: the Importance of Restoring Accountability, Transparency and Oversight to Public Higher Education Governance*." S-1609 calls for an expanded Commission of Higher Education with greater oversight authority and goes further in mandating training and accountability of board members. Although a State law, Governor Christie has refused to implement it, and instead is calling for the total elimination of the Commission.

The Kean Task Force report vests even more power in our institutions' Presidents' Council. Yet, there will continue to be State dollars flowing into each of the public institutions without a structure to ensure that such an investment meets the needs of our State or our society. Some have argued that we can trust the Presidents of our institutions since they know best what their needs are when advancing teaching, research and service to improve our society during this global era. The rationale does not address the mechanisms on how those institutions would work together to achieve goals advocated by our citizens and critical to New Jersey's goal to have an exceptional higher education system that will serve the needs of our citizens in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and science. Having a distinguished system of higher education creates a better society for our communities and it serves to attract those who wish to invest in a state with an intelligent citizenry.

The proposed governance structure outlined in the Report, headed by civic leaders advising the Governor, and augmented by a strong President's Council, sounds appealing but it will not solve existing problems and will create new ones. Retention and graduation rates, losing our best students to other

states, capacity issues, capital funding, and attracting the best faculty to our institutions does not connect with nor can it be resolved by those plans. These issues are common across our institutions and, yet, the proposed structure appears to create vertical silos of institutions competing with each other. Such a model will not encourage the creative innovation we need at this time nor does it address how we will enhance the collective research potential and service initiatives across our higher education institutions. New Jersey institutions of higher education are more likely to prosper through a cooperative governance structure with strong leadership at the helm that nurtures and supports our students and, in turn, the interests of New Jersey.

We believe that the Commission on Higher Education must not be abolished, but instead be strengthened and given even more authority based on lack of accountability and misuse of public funds. The current Commission includes and must continue to include student and faculty representatives who are the core of higher education. It is much more representative of New Jersey citizens than a Higher Education Council appointed by a Secretary of Higher Education.

We find it ironic that the Task Force Report approves of some of the changes in PL 2009, Chapter 308, but only chooses to recommend the sections it approves. At the same time, they recommend drastically changing other sections to suit the Presidents' Council wishes, rather than asking for the Governor to implement the law in its entirety. They apparently want to accomplish what they could not change in S-1609 before it became law by using the Task Force Report as a means to those goals.

INSTITUTIONAL GOVERNANCE

Task Force Recommendation: Trustees should have qualifications to ensure their ability to oversee the institutions in their charge. The State should...continue to give these institutions high degree of self-governance.

Only by quoting the Report itself can its blind faith in judgment of boards of trustees be captured:

> *"Managing the finances of New Jersey's colleges and universities is not an easy task. It should rest in the hands of independent boards of trustees, who have the ultimate public responsibility to operate their institutions efficiently and well. New Jerseyans should appreciate the value added by the citizen volunteers who serve on these boards. They give their time, their talent, and their financial support to help create centers of learning that benefits students and the institutions' surrounding communities. We must ensure that trustees of the highest quality continue to be attracted to these positions."*

Here is the source of one of our fundamental disagreements with the Kean Task Force Report. Some of our "institutional leaders" have demonstrated that they are not to be trusted and already have too much "autonomy." The management of New Jersey's colleges and universities must not rest in their hands alone. The individuals who the Kean Report shamelessly lauds as underappreciated "citizen volunteers" are no such thing. They are mainly corporate executives with political connections. It takes years for corporate board members to comprehend the academic culture. At the point in time that they do understand the culture, they oftentimes are not reappointed to, or choose to, leave the board thereby necessitating new member training. Over the years, our unions have nominated many qualified candidates, but not one of them has ever been appointed.

The Kean Report calls for "……adequate State oversight and protection of taxpayer investment" (p. 25). We need to examine if the governing boards have been successful when we focus on the most important aspect of higher education: producing informed citizens who can participate effectively in our democracy and who can contribute to the expansion of our economy. The underfunding of higher education at the State level may just undermine any discussion of creating an equitable governance

structure for our public institutions of higher education. Allowing governing boards free reign with tuition and fees is likely to undermine the State's past and current investments in higher education.

Even under the best of circumstances, the perspective of the trustees is too narrow, inevitably ignoring the needs of the system as a whole and consistently favoring management over faculty by deferring to the wishes of their chosen president. How soon the Kean Task Force forgot the scathing 2007 State Commission of Investigation (SCI) Report, "*Vulnerable to Abuse: the Importance of Restoring Accountability, Transparency and Oversight to Public Higher Education Governance*" written in response to a series of higher education scandals directly attributed to lack of State oversight. The Task Force Report totally ignores the remedies for abuses highlighted in the SCI Report.

With minimal State oversight, the State college and university boards of trustees have raised tuition to new heights, provided their presidents and top managers with lucrative salaries and perks, increased the ranks of non-essential high level management, decreased the ranks of full-time faculty, accumulated excessive debt, built new facilities regardless of cost or need and neglected existing facilities through protracted deferred maintenance.

There have been too many instances of lack of oversight in new construction or upgrading current buildings, at the cost of millions of dollars. Examples include: dormitories built that were never completed and had to be torn down because of mold; townhouses built with a large overrun in costs that did not open in time for the semester, which in turn caused students to be housed in hotels that lacked sprinkler systems, the purchase of a country club, etc.

During the Corzine administration, Jane Oates, then the Executive Director of the Commission of Higher Education, discovered that most of the State colleges and universities under-reported the number of full-time employees eligible for State benefits and that the institutions did not reimburse the State for the cost of those additional employees. This omission cost the State tens of millions of dollars. A State college's purchase of a country club, cited above, deprived the local township much needed revenue removing the facility from the tax rolls.

Task Force Recommendation: Except for Rutgers… the governing boards of the senior public colleges and universities should initiate the trustee nomination process by reviewing candidates and presenting them to the governor.

Far from restoring oversight, the Task Force goes in the opposite direction. Currently the Governor's office reviews potential candidates wishing to serve on State college/university boards of trustees and makes appointments, subject to approval of the State Senate. The Report advocates a system whereby the boards themselves "initiate the trustee nomination process by reviewing candidates and presenting them to the governor" who "should be required to select one of the board's nominees." Diversity representation on the boards of trustees is an important factor that is frequently ignored in considering both nominations and appointments. Ultimately, the Governor can appoint a nominee of his/her own choosing, but only in consultation with the trustees. This is nothing but a formula for self-perpetuating boards of trustees. The public is entirely eliminated from the process. Our Boards of Trustees should reflect the diversity of the State.

One positive way to improve institutional governance is to expand the boards to include two employees chosen by campus employee unions. Our unions have been pressing for legislation to accomplish this goal for decades, and currently Bill A-392 is sitting in the Assembly Higher Education Committee. Without specifically referencing this bill or others of this nature, the Task Force Report states that: "The legislature should refrain from trying to micromanage New Jersey's colleges and universities, and the governor should oppose, and ultimately veto, such measures." However, the Task Force Report favors legislative interventions when it advances the agenda of the State college/university presidents and boards of trustees, explicitly endorsing every one of Governor Christie's "tool kit"

proposals affecting higher education, including A-2964 and S-2172, which would authorize individual boards of trustees to extend the pre-tenure probationary period beyond five years. The Report (p.30) actually misrepresents these bills to make them sound more palatable, by conflating them with a non-tool kit bill A-3357, which would extend the probationary period to six years in the County and State Colleges/University systems.

REGULATIONS AND UNFUNDED MANDATES

Task Force Recommendation: To increase the efficient operation of all of New Jersey's colleges and universities and to help them achieve their missions, the bipartisan Red Tape Review Commission should act favorably on the New Jersey Presidents' Council's "Regulatory Relief and Unfunded Mandates" report. Going forward, the State should pay for any mandates imposed on New Jersey's colleges and universities. The current mandates cost tens of millions of dollars each year, burdening students with higher tuition costs and diverting scarce resources from the educational missions of the institutions.

The Presidents' Council Report, issued in February 2010, contains a number of recommendations detrimental to sound governance, the public interest and the welfare of employees we represent. It seeks exemption from anti-corruption "pay to play" laws. It ignores its civic duty by opposing free tuition to the unemployed, members of the National Guard and surviving spouses of public safety workers killed in the line of duty unless the State provides the funding. It opposes tuition waivers for NJ STAR students. We reject the notion that these mandates are not integral to the mission of our public institutions of higher education. They should be factored into the institution's operating costs and funded in the same manner. The presidents should not be permitted to shirk their obligations to the community.

The Presidents' Council also proposes to eliminate employer pension contributions for part-time employees, including adjunct faculty, based on the argument that "these employees currently must self-fund the cost of health benefits and should self-fund their pension benefits." Adjunct faculty has been paying 5.5% of their salary towards their pensions. There is no recognition of the Presidents' Council Report that the public colleges and universities cannot expect to provide quality education to our students by exploiting its contingent workforce.

Task Force Recommendations: To make rules regarding personnel consistent among Rutgers and the other public colleges and universities, the legislature should pass Governor Christie's tool-kit bills that would reform workers compensation, collective bargaining, and civil service at the State colleges and universities. Authorizes the State colleges and universities to conduct collective bargaining (S-2026/A-2963; S-2337/A-3219)

The "tool-kit" bills poised on the very top of the boards of trustees' and presidents' wish lists are the dissolution of state-wide bargaining, eliminating civil service at the State colleges/universities and changes to impasse in negotiations. How could separate bargaining bring about consistent standards regarding personnel? If anything, separate bargaining would create an even greater disparity, pitting one institution against another and undermining employee morale.

The State colleges/universities have a thirty-seven year bargaining history with the Council of NJ State College Locals-AFT, based on certification from the Public Employment Relations Commission (PERC) which favors "broad based units." Furthermore, the State college/university presidents are represented at the negotiations table and are signatories to agreements. There are hundreds of campus-based agreements that have been, and continue to be, successfully and amicably negotiated on the local level. These local agreements provide for institutional flexibility and the development of a unique educational identity.

There are currently four State employee contracts covering eight of the State colleges and universities, except for Thomas Edison which does not have an adjunct faculty unit. Under the scenario

envisioned by the Task Force, Governor Christie and the presidents, there would be thirty-five separate contract negotiations and thirty-five separate contracts. This would obviously create administrative chaos, exponentially increase the risk of labor unrest, unnecessarily establish an adversarial relationship between labor and management and cost the institutions additional thousands of dollars in legal fees and extra personnel costs for additional labor negotiations and contract administration. From the employee standpoint, the first casualty would be our uniform salary guides that discourage management from rewarding their favorites and have done so much to ensure the equitable treatment of women and minorities. Ample proof can readily be found in the Rutgers, NJIT and UMDNJ faculty contracts which allow management to pay widely disparate salaries to faculty doing virtually the same work. This proposal to de-centralize bargaining also directly opposes Governor Christie's position advocating the consolidation of public school districts and county-district wide control over the bargaining of new contracts.

The recommendation to eliminate civil service at the State colleges/universities (S-2026/A-2963; S-2388/A-3220) is also unfair and will ultimately lead to a patronage system and favoritism in hiring and compensation. Vitally important protections will be lost for these employees.

The recommendation to implement the Governor's toolkit bills S-2027 and A-2962 would require PERC fact finders/mediators assigned to resolve an impasse in negotiations involving unions at our State colleges/universities to take into account the following: (1) the impact of budget cuts, (2) the impact of a recommended settlement on tuition rates and (3) the cost of State employee benefits. The implication is that PERC's consideration of these factors will result in leaner and meaner collective bargaining agreements. These factors are one-sided. If the impact of budget cuts is to be considered, then why not the impact of budget increases? If the cost of State employee benefits is to be weighed in the balance, why not the cost of managerial compensation, documented examples of waste and fiscal irresponsibility or for that matter, the size of an institution's reserve funds? Although we are all concerned about rising tuition, there is no direct correlation between contract settlements and tuition rates. High debt service caused by excessive borrowing and other poor managerial decisions are more responsible for driving up tuition than faculty and staff salaries. In sum, this bill is imprudent and should be rejected.

The State colleges/universities have enjoyed "autonomy" for many years now, but will not be satisfied until they can operate as private institutions with no State oversight. They are already halfway there. Whereas the Council of NJ State College Locals' master contract provides for a uniform salary scale with guaranteed annual increments, each institution has a free hand in the hiring and compensation of its own managerial staff. As the proportion of managers to full time faculty and staff has risen, so have managerial salaries. Bonuses and other perks inflate the salaries of presidents. Local boards of trustees have awarded presidents and other administrators' bonuses while their employees were furloughed. Presidents have used millions of dollars of institutional funds to purchase and refurbish homes. They shield themselves from public accountability by claiming the source is not State funds. There should be strict top-down managerial accountability to a central authority regardless of funding source.

MISSION

Mission Differentiation – There is a persistent myth asserting that New Jersey's colleges and universities are needlessly duplicating programs. The Task Force looked for evidence proving these accusations, but uncovered little evidence to support this claim.

The Task Force Report dismisses claims that the current governance structure has allowed the college/university presidents to create duplicative programs, but it apparently did not look very far. New construction for the sake of enhancing the reputation of one institution at the expense of its neighbor not only costs millions, but has resulted in empty classrooms. If they are not empty, it is likely that an adjunct faculty member is in front of the class. State colleges/universities overreliance on adjunct

faculty, which has grown rapidly in recent years, does not merit a single sentence in the Report, but this does not change the fact that overworked, underpaid adjunct faculty, with little or no voice in campus governance, outnumber full-time faculty throughout the State college/university system. The worst example is Kean University, where the proportion of adjunct faculty to full-time faculty is three to one. It is important to note that at many of the New Jersey colleges and universities adjunct faculty do not have offices, do not have office hours, do not advise students, do not write grants, do not conduct research, do not serve on committees, and do not engage in curriculum development, etc. The contingency labor force, adjunct faculty, has grown disproportionately to the full-time tenure track faculty.

New Jersey's colleges and universities need to remain true to their mission of making higher education accessible and to providing a quality education for their students. Our colleges and universities should make diversity in education a priority and invest in their students more than in their sports programs and be required to adhere to good governance principles of financial oversight, transparency, and accountability for tuition dollars and the use of public money.

They can achieve this by being required to conduct educational and campus needs assessments on a regular basis in collaboration with regional colleges and universities, faculty, students and the community as a basis for setting priorities and allocating resources. They should also hold annual community meetings with faculty, students, parents and community members to participate in open discussions regarding the institutions plans and strategies for providing access to affordable education. Boards must also establish measures to ensure the institutions are providing quality educations and mechanisms to monitor these measures.

TUITION

Task Force Recommendation: To help mitigate tuition increases, the governor and the legislature should not impose tuition caps on Rutgers and other senior public colleges and universities.

While admitting that New Jersey has the second highest State college/university tuition and fees in the nation, its concerns over the high cost of college education have a hollow ring. The Report explicitly declares that "Caps on tuition and fees infringe on institutional autonomy. Institutional leaders, attuned to the needs of their campuses, must be trusted to set the level of tuition appropriate to raise funds needed to support their operations and maintain educational excellence." This is a gross repudiation of the democratic process. Legislators, parents, students, educators and other concerned citizens are asked to defer to self-appointed boards of trustees to make this decision.

Tuition and State operating aid are inextricably linked at all of New Jersey's public colleges and universities. There is a direct correlation between State funding cuts and the rate of tuition and student fee increases. This was demonstrated well in FY2010 when the Legislature inserted funding language that required tuition and fee increases to be capped at 3% of the previous year's rate. In return, the State colleges and universities were level funded for FY2010 after several years of cuts. When determining its higher education appropriations, the State not only factors in the institutions' requested amount but also their other sources of revenue including tuition and student fees. Therefore, when Rutgers or any of the State colleges and universities raises tuition rates in July of each year, after the State budget has been approved, the State will consider that new tuition revenue as it discounts the subsequent year's funding. This, in effect, has become the formula for determining State operating aid for the past 20 years.

In the long term, it is actually in the interest of the institutions to maintain the caps in order to drive up the operating aid. As State institutions of higher education, the college presidents are essentially asking for the power to tax middle-class and working families twice – as taxpayers and as writers of tuition checks. One of the more pernicious aspects of this taxation is the hidden student fees which can be as high as $4,500 per year on some campuses, or 50% of the tuition rate. These are separate fees

from tuition and room/board fees. In many years they have increased by double digits even when tuition has been capped. In the past two years, some institutions have resorted to introducing new fees, even though both tuition and student fees have been capped by the Legislature.

Our State colleges and universities have excellent reputations that are backed by nationally ranked programs and highly regarded faculty and staff. Students and scholars are attracted to New Jersey institutions from around the nation and across the globe. But without proper State funding and appropriate caps on tuition and fees, the American Dream will slip out of the reach of the youth of New Jersey. New Jersey has only one Ivy League school, Princeton. We are quickly getting to the point of pricing all of our colleges and universities in the same manner. When a high school graduate from Deptford leaves New Jersey to attend the University of Delaware because it costs less, there's a problem. When our brightest graduates from Mendham or from McNair Academic in Jersey City decide that Rutgers is too expensive and instead attend college out of state, we have a problem. When 40% of our State's college bound high school graduates are bound to go out of state because of cost or lack of capacity, we have a crisis.

The high tuition/high financial aid model is failing our students, their parents, and our State. College graduates are taking on too much debt and their parents are finding it increasingly difficult to qualify for low interest rate loans. The new Congress is now looking to cut Pell Grants and we already know that State aid is not keeping pace with the rise in tuition and fees. The State must increase its contribution to operating aid in order to keep college affordable and accessible for the middle class and working families of New Jersey. The risks of not acting are high. Many of our wealthiest and most successful citizens are products of a New Jersey public higher education. They likely attended college under better economic conditions. If we deny that opportunity to future generations then our State's high social and economic status will suffer. Higher Education has always been an investment that pays off. Our leaders must find the resources to continue to offer that opportunity.

Maintaining "current policies regarding TAG funding" is not sufficient. If, as the Report reveals, fully 34% of undergraduates are part-time students, then they too should be eligible for TAG. The Council has advocated for such legislation for decades with no support from the State college/university presidents. Furthermore, eliminating duplication of functions and unnecessary bureaucracy that flow from institutional autonomy, limiting the ranks and salaries of top administrators and implementing more shared services to keep operating costs down are all measures that can be effective in controlling tuition. None of these receive any consideration in the Report.

CAPITAL FINANCING/OPERATING SUPPORT

Task Force Recommendation: While fully recognizing the State's immediate budgetary concerns, we recommend that the State must, as soon as possible, provide greater financial support for the operating budgets of New Jersey's colleges and universities.

The Task Force Report correctly highlights the long term underfunding of higher education in New Jersey, although this will not be news to legislators and to those who have read the New Jersey Policy Perspective report *Flunking Out*: *New Jersey's Support for Higher Education Falls Short,* first issued in 2006 and updated in 2010. Items mentioned in the Task Force Report that mirror the *Flunking Out* report include the following:

- Operating support to New Jersey's colleges and universities has been declining for 20 years.
- The size of the cuts has increased alarmingly over the past five years.
- New Jersey's colleges and universities have suffered a long and steady starvation of State aid, under both political parties, even as costs and student demand has grown.

- New Jersey ranks 34th among the 50 states in per capita higher education spending, 39th in higher education spending as a percentage of total state spending, 44th in higher education spending per $1,000 of personal income and 47th in the percentage increase in state appropriations for higher education in the past five years. (p. 129 of report)

To reverse these trends, the Report makes some worthwhile recommendations — the issuance of general obligations bonds and the creation of "a dedicated revenue stream to provide annual capital funding for institutions of higher education." We agree with this. However, the revenue stream for facilities and capital initiatives should not come from increases in student tuitions or fees. There should be dedicated funding for operating costs and a separate dedicated revenue stream for debt payment on general obligation bonds so that the increased debt payments don't cut as deeply into operating costs. Furthermore, our campuses must use some of the bonding revenue to implement long overdue deferred maintenance on much of our infrastructure. Existing older buildings need upgrading because, HVAC systems are failing, roofs are leaking and many buildings are substandard and in some cases dangerous. There is an additional need to upgrade the outdated technology at our institutions.

We also question why the report lacks substantive proposals on ways for institutions to save money. For example, our public higher education institutions use different student and financial computerized systems such as People Soft and Banner or attempt to develop their own, as Rutgers did. Before autonomy, a shared system provided payroll and other services. There are some institutions that use the same system, however they do not coordinate their purchasing, training, and modifications to NJ's reporting requirements. Evidence of this kind of waste was discovered at two of our institutions when they each sent ten or more personnel to Hawaii for training when they could have received the training in New Jersey.

One shared system, or 12 institutions using the same computerized system would achieve better pricing, savings on joint training sessions conducted in-state, and open the door for a seamless exchange of information. This could include a universal student database, permitting easier transfer of student records between institutions. A resident student at one institution could, over the summer, take courses at another institution and have the credits seamlessly transferred to his or her primary institution. Students who would otherwise have to delay their graduations for one semester due to last minute course cancelations or the failure of the institution to offer a specific course could easily check to see if the course is offered at another institution. A universal database for personnel would make it easier to track adjunct faculty and part-time employees who are working at more than one institution. The hiring of adjunct faculty could be streamlined and once hired at one institution they could be hired at another under an abbreviated hiring process. Each institution would not have to certify degrees and other personnel information. Other streamlining could include the way our colleges and universities report tuition, financial aid and other data to Treasury and to the Commission on Higher Education, ensuring uniformity in verification procedures

We also believe that there should be a statewide compensation guide for out-of-unit employees, i.e. presidents, provosts, vice-presidents, deans and mid-level managers, and that their compensation should be tied to objective guidelines that take into account the size of each institution (physical plant, students and faculty) and the quality of their performance in meeting established goals and objectives. It is absurd that the president of Thomas Edison State College, his executive employees and mid-level administrators command salaries comparable to presidents and executives at institutions that employ resident faculty and educate on-site student populations.

Task Force Recommendation: To help mitigate tuition increases, the State should fund increases in salaries negotiated at the 12 senior public colleges and universities at least at the same level as any increases in salaries negotiated with State employees.

While we strongly agree with this recommendation, there is no direct connection between State funding of our salaries and tuition increases. Chronic State underfunding of the entire cost of public higher education certainly plays an important role as do other factors such as debt service and excessive managerial salaries.

However, the Report presents a chart that isolates "the absence of funding for salary increases negotiated by the State itself at the nine State colleges and universities" as if it were the only cause of tuition increases. The chart (p. 47) is misleading and its numbers defy logic. In 2005 and 2006, for example, years in which the State funded close to 50% of its salary obligations, tuition rose by 9.3% and 7.1% respectively, whereas in 2007, when the State did not fund the salary increase at all, tuition rose by a lesser amount, i.e. 6.9%. Furthermore, compare 1998 and 2004, years that the State did not fund negotiated salary increases. In 1998, when it would have taken $13,500,000 to fully fund the salary increase, tuition increased by 10%. However, in 2004 when only $4,318,000 would have fully funded the salary increase, tuitions rose by 10.2% tuition increase. There appears, then, to be no direct correlation between salary funding and tuition increases. Ultimately, this chart is a presidential myth because during the first year of any increase, the State may fund anywhere from zero to 100% of the negotiated salary increase, but it does base subsequent years funding on the institutions new base which includes the increases.

The Report (p. 44) acknowledged that "New Jersey public colleges and universities are more leveraged with debt than most public institutions in the country" and "they pay this debt in part through tuition increases and fees…" Indeed, debt service is an extremely important factor in driving up tuition, but the Task Force Reports fails to make the connection.

UMDNJ and Medical Education in New Jersey

Task Force Recommendation: The University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey should be fundamentally transformed while sustaining the integrity of medical education and healthcare delivery in Newark. Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and the School of Public Health should be merged with Rutgers University's New Brunswick-Piscataway campuses to establish a first-class comprehensive university-based health science center. When Robert Wood Johnson Medical School merges with Rutgers, concurrent steps must be taken to address the other operations of UMDNJ, including University Hospital, New Jersey Medical School, the future of medical education in Newark, and medical education in South Jersey. An expert panel should be convened as soon as possible to implement these recommendations from concept to action, and to consider possible next steps or options expressed to the Task Force. These include a proposal from the Vagelos Commission to merge senior public higher education institutions in Newark, and a proposal to merge senior public higher education institutions in South Jersey. Immediate resolution is imperative.

Although much emphasis has been placed on the ways in which re-organization would strengthen academic programs and increase research funding, a re-organization should also be an opportunity to create better employee relations and improve staff morale. Each of the institutions being considered in this re-organization plan has more than one union representing its employees, with bargaining units of nursing, professionals, technical and support staff. The Task Force should establish a working group with unions representing employees at the institutions under reorganization consideration. Involving employees in the reorganization process will ensure the integrity of the mission of both UMDNJ and Rutgers University.

As employees at the frontline of delivering these services to our communities, and as taxpayers, we stand for the following principles:

- Maintain services, research and medical education that UMDNJ presently provides.
- Stop the rush to a merger that is being orchestrated behind closed doors. There must be full transparency and meaningful input from employees and their unions.
- Assure that any reorganization plan or merger does not add additional tax burden to New Jersey's working families.
- Assure that University Hospital is not handed over to a private corporation. It serves a vital function in northern New Jersey.
- Preserve our right to collectively bargain, to have a voice regarding our wages, benefits and working conditions.

CONCLUSION

Lack of central planning, coordination and oversight negates the very concept of a *system* of public higher education in New Jersey. We agree that "the State must reverse decades of underfunding and neglect and instead invest in and embrace our colleges and universities." However, if the State ultimately lives up to its obligation to properly fund higher education, it should not be solely up to our institutions' presidents and self-perpetuating, self-aggrandizing boards of trustees to decide how this money is spent.

A five person task force consisting of corporate and higher education administrators, clearly speaking on behalf of the presidents and boards of trustees, should not be the only voices to whom the Governor listens when it comes to making higher education policies for the citizens on New Jersey. A better solution would be to reconvene a task force that truly includes all segments of the higher education community and truly values the input from those who have made a life-long career at these institutions. The delivery of graduate education in general and medical education in particular, is a topic of great importance to our citizens and to the future of health care research in New Jersey. The knowledge of our members is essential during this planning period given their critical involvement in any changes to the current structure. Only then will there be a report that honestly and effectively addresses real problems and provides real solutions. Until the voices of legislators, students and their families, State college employees and their union leadership and community organizations are heard, no action should be taken on any of the recommendations in the Report, except those that call for more funding for higher education. To begin this process, we call on the State Legislature to conduct public hearings on the future of public higher education in New Jersey its mission, funding, affordability and governance.

Appendix I

Governor's New Jersey Higher Education Task Force Recommendations vs.

P.L. 2009, c. 308 (Senate 1609)

(Note: The NJ Higher Education Task Force recommendations are in italics and P.L. 2009, c. 308 is below each recommendation.)

The Commission on Higher Education should be eliminated and replaced with a new structure empowered to succeed. A Secretary of Higher Education and a new advisory Governor's Higher Education Council should stand at the center of the new structure. The Governor's Higher Education Council should have ***limited power of review, including veto authority****, over actions by the Presidents' Council. The various statutory duties of the Commission on Higher Education must be reviewed and, where appropriate and feasible, assigned to the Secretary of Higher Education and/or the Governor's Higher Education Council.*

Responsibilities of the Commission:

14. The Commission shall be responsible for:
    a. Statewide planning for higher education including research on higher education issues and the development of a comprehensive master plan, including, but not limited to, the establishment of new institutions, closure of existing institutions, and consolidation of institutions, which plan shall be long-range in nature and regularly revised and updated. The Council may request the Commission to conduct a study of a particular issue. The commission may require from institutions of higher education such reports or other information as may be necessary to enable the Commission to perform its duties;
    b. advocacy on behalf of higher education including informing the public of the needs and accomplishments of higher education in New Jersey;
    c. making recommendations to the Governor and Legislature on higher education initiatives and incentive programs of statewide significance;
    d. final administrative decisions over institutional licensure and university status giving due consideration to the accreditation status of the institution. The Commission shall furnish the Presidents' Council with any pertinent information compiled on behalf of the subject institution and the Council shall then make recommendations to the Commission concerning the licensure of the institution or university status within sixty days of receipt of the information;
    e. adopting a code of ethics applicable to institutions of higher education;
    f. final administrative decisions over new academic programs that go beyond the programmatic mission of the institution and final administrative decisions over a change in the programmatic mission of an institution. In addition, within 60 days of referral of a proposed new program determined to be unduly expensive or duplicative by the Council, the Commission may deny approval of programs which do not exceed the programmatic mission of the institution, but which are determined by the New Jersey Presidents' Council to be unduly duplicative or expensive;
    g. reviewing requests for State support from the institutions in relation to the mission of the institution and Statewide goals and proposing a coordinated budget policy statement to the Governor and Legislature;

h. communicating with the State Board of Education and Commissioner of Education to advance public education at all levels including articulation between the public schools and higher education community;
i. applying for and accepting grants from the federal government, or any agency thereof, or grants, gifts or other contributions from any foundation, corporation, association or individual, and complying with the terms, conditions and limitations thereof, for the purpose of advancing higher education. Any money so received may be expended by the Commission upon warrant of the director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Department of the Treasury on vouchers certified by the Executive Director of the Commission;
j. acting as the lead agency of communication with the federal government concerning higher education issues, except that the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority shall act, in cooperation with the Commission, as the lead agency on issues of student assistance;
k. exercising all of the powers and duties previously exercised by the Board of Higher Education, the Department of Higher Education, and the Chancellor of Higher Education, under the "New Jersey Higher Education Building Construction Bond Act of 1971," P.L.1971, c.164, the "New Jersey Medical Education Facilities Bond Act of 1977," P.L.1977, c.235, the "Jobs, Science and Technology Bond Act of 1984," P.L.1984, c.99 and the "Jobs, Education and Competitiveness Bond Act of 1988," P.L.1988, c.78, the "Higher Education Equipment Leasing Fund Act," P.L.1993, c.136, and the "Higher Education Facilities Trust Fund Act," P.L.1993, c.375;
l. exercising any other power or responsibility necessary in order to carry out the provisions of this act;
m. consulting with the Higher Education Student Assistance Authority on student assistance matters;
n. advising and making recommendations for consideration to the Governor and the governing board of a public research university or a State college for members of that governing board appointed by the Governor; and
o. examining and recommending to institutions of higher education opportunities for joint purchasing and other joint arrangements that would be advantageous to the institutions.

The Council should be composed of five citizen members of high distinction and great experience, non-partisan and independent, and with no more than three members being registered voters from any one political party. The governor should appoint its members to five-year terms, which should be staggered. The governor should designate the chair and vice chair. The Council should meet not less than quarterly.

The Commission on Higher Education consists of 15 members: 10 public members, to be appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the Senate without regard for political affiliation; two public members to be appointed by the Governor, one upon the recommendation of the President of the Senate and one upon the recommendation of the Speaker of the General Assembly; the chairperson of the New Jersey Presidents' Council, ex officio; one faculty member from an institution of higher education to be appointed by the Governor with the advice and consent of the Senate; and the chairperson of the Board of Higher Education Student Assistance Authority, ex officio, or a designee from the public members of the authority. The public members shall reflect the diversity of the State. (*Note: The Task Force recommendation on the composition of a Council does not reflect the diversity of the State as is required for the current Commission which has many more members.)*

The secretary should be appointed by and report directly to the governor, with Senate confirmation. The Secretary of Higher Education should not be a formal member of the governor's cabinet, but should have cabinet rank. The Secretary of Higher Education should have the authority to demand the board of trustees of a college or university in New Jersey to take immediate corrective action when an institution either fails or is at risk of failing because of such serious situations as financial difficulty, fraud, or gross mismanagement. This authority should be used sparingly and when authorized by the governor. The Secretary shall have additional authority to investigate, audit, or remediate the situation.

The Governor shall appoint, with the advice and consent of the Senate, a Secretary of Higher Education who shall serve at the pleasure of the Governor during the Governor's term of office and until a successor is appointed and qualified. The appointment shall be made after consultation with and recommendations from the New Jersey Commission on Higher Education and the New Jersey Presidents' Council except that the person holding the office of executive director of the Commission on the effective date of this act shall be the initial Secretary of Higher Education. **The secretary shall hold cabinet-level rank** and shall serve as executive director of the commission.

a. The Secretary of Higher Education, with the concurrence of the Governor, shall have authority to visit public institutions of higher education to examine their manner of conducting their affairs and to enforce an observance of the laws of the State.

b. The Secretary, with the concurrence of the Governor, may administer oaths and examine witnesses under oath in any part of the State with regard to any matter pertaining to higher education, and may cause the examination to be reduced to writing. Any person willfully giving false testimony upon being sworn or affirmed to tell the truth shall be guilty of a misdemeanor.

c. The secretary, with the concurrence of the Governor, may issue subpoenas pursuant to this section compelling the attendance of witnesses and the production of books and papers in any part of the State. Any person who shall neglect or refuse to obey the command of the subpoena or who, after appearing, shall refuse to be sworn and testify, unless such refusal is on grounds recognized by law, shall in either event be subject to a penalty of $1,000.00 for each offense to be recovered in a civil action. Such penalty when recovered shall be paid into the State Treasury.

Except for Rutgers, which is governed by the 1956 Compact, the governing boards of the senior public colleges and universities should initiate the trustee nomination process by reviewing candidates and presenting them to the governor. The governor should be required to nominate or reject nominees recommended by the governing boards. If the nominee is rejected, the board should be allowed to submit another nominee. Ultimately, the governor should have the prerogative to appoint a nominee of his or her choice, but in all cases should give the board of trustees' notice of such an appointment, allowing the board to advise and consult with the governor about the proposed nominee. Cooperative consultation between the governor and his or her designees on the one hand and the governing boards on the other is critical to the success of the trustee appointment process and ensuring the steady stewardship of New Jersey's public colleges and universities.

The composition and size of the board of trustees shall be determined by the board; however, each board shall have not less than seven nor more than 15 members. The members shall be appointed by the Governor **with the advice and consent of the Senate**. Each board of trustees shall recommend potential new members to the Governor. The terms of office of appointed members shall be for six years beginning on July 1 and ending on June 30. Each member shall serve until his successor shall have been appointed and qualified and vacancies shall be filled in the same manner as the original appointments for the remainders of the unexpired terms. Any member of a board of trustees may be removed by the Governor for cause upon notice and opportunity to be heard.

All boards of trustees not covered under P.L. 2009, c. 308 should, if they have not already done so, take the following actions to ensure the transparency and accountability of their actions: establish an audit committee, appoint an internal auditor, and conduct an annual audit by an outside auditor.

It is unclear whether or not boards of trustees are currently complying with **P.L**. 2009, c. 308. The Task Force has remained silent on the requirement of an independent outside auditor and the submission of the audit to commission. Furthermore, all of the other committees and their respective duties as required in the law. (Executive Committee, Compensation Committee and a Nominations and Governance Committee.)

The State should dedicate more resources toward the collection and analysis of higher education data, and the proposed Secretary of Higher Education should oversee this task. Under current data collection efforts, it is difficult to gain a comprehensive perspective on the performance of higher education in New Jersey. Creating a single source of data collection would improve governance efforts, policymaking, and statewide performance. The Secretary would determine statewide quality performance preferences, especially outcomes linked to preparation for professions (such as national teacher exam pass rates and nursing board pass rates) and workforce development initiatives.

Each public institution of higher education shall prepare and make available to the public an annual report on the condition of the institution which shall include, but need not be limited to a profile of the student body including graduation rates, SAT or other test scores, the percentage of New Jersey residents in the student body, the number of scholarship students and the number of Educational Opportunity Fund students in attendance; a profile of the faculty including the ratio of full to part-time faculty members, and major research and public service activities; a profile of the trustees or governors as applicable; and, a profile of the institution, including degree and certificate programs, status of accreditation, major capital projects, any new collaborative undertakings or partnerships, any new programs or initiatives designed to respond to specific State needs, an accounting of demonstrable efficiency and quality improvements, and any other information which the commission and the institution deem appropriate. The form and general content of the report shall be established by the Commission on Higher Education.

Appendix II

A Union of Professionals

AFT Higher Education

Student Success in Higher Education

Student Success

A Union of Professionals

AFT Higher Education

A Division of the American Federation of Teachers

Higher Education Program and Policy Council

AFT Higher Education Staff

Foreword

The most critical issue facing higher education today is how to provide access to instruction and services that will enable many more students to fulfill their postsecondary aspirations. Education, being both a public and a private good, brings together many of the forces of change in our society and creates vast and unceasing debate. The paper you are about to read, prepared by the higher education leadership of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), states what we think needs to be done to help college students achieve educational success. The AFT is a national union of 1.5 million members that includes approximately 175,000 faculty and professional staff members in the nation's colleges and universities.

As chairwoman of the national AFT Higher Education program and policy council, I invite you to engage in our discussion and in activities that will result from it. As the president of AFT Washington, a previous president of AFT Seattle Community College, Local 1789 and as a part-time, then a full-time professor of English at my institution, I have had unique opportunities to observe faculty, staff, administrations, education bureaucracies and students at their work. I know that we want to work together for the common good—the good of our profession, our institutions and the people we teach.

As a leader of a representative union, I understand the union's responsibility to further the interests of our members. A large part of that consists of working to ensure that the labor of AFT members is well compensated and that their employment conditions are fair, secure and rewarding.

But that is far from all of it. The AFT is also a union which believes that advancing the interests of our members means furthering their professional as well as their economic objectives—and it is not an exaggeration to say that student success is what AFT Higher Education members are all about. Making a difference in the lives of students is why faculty and staff members choose to be in the academy, why they go to work each day, why they keep up with the latest scholarship in their disciplines, why they spend so much time meeting with students and assessing their work. Day in and day out, the nation's college faculty and staff demonstrate a high level of personal and professional commitment to students, to higher education, to their communities and to the future of the world we live in. The following report is issued in the spirit of that commitment.

Sandra Schroeder
March 2011

Executive Summary

THE FOLLOWING THREE PAGES PROVIDE AN OVERVIEW OF AFT HIGHER EDUCATION'S PLAN TO HELP STUDENTS LEARN HOW TO GET MORE OUT OF THEIR COLLEGE EXPERIENCE.

terms than quick degree attainment or high standardized test scores—they usually define student success as the achievement of the student's own, often developing, education goals. Our members not only teach students who may be on track to obtain degrees or certificates, but they also teach students who are looking primarily for job training without earning a formal credential or for the acquisition of professional skills to enhance their career opportunities. Other students are studying academic subjects strictly for learning's sake. Adding to the complexity, students often adjust their goals throughout their college years. For these reasons, measuring student success solely in terms of degree attainment reflects a misunderstanding of today's academy. To understand the realities of student success, we must begin to identify ways to elicit information on student goals throughout the educational process and to ensure that reliable data on student goals are fed back into the curriculum development and assessment processes. It is also important—and specifically called for by the students who participated in our focus groups—to ensure that students have multiple opportunities to assess and reassess their goals through a rich process of advisement or counseling.

- Second, campus discussions on student success should be undertaken with a clear recognition of the thoughtful work on curriculum and assessment already going on at most campuses, and with a commitment not to be perpetually reinventing the wheel.

- Third, once a broad understanding of student success is achieved, professionals at the institutional level need to collaborate systematically on curriculum and assessment in accordance with this understanding—, with faculty and professional staff in the lead. Because institutional missions and student bodies are so diverse, and because it is important to capitalize on the mix of faculty expertise particular to each institution, the AFT believes that planning for student success should be conducted at the institutional level rather than across institutions or at the state or national levels. In this regard, our members reject the idea that institutional outputs can be compared easily like the ingredients on a cereal box. The one constant in higher education is diversity, not uniformity, and diversity is also its greatest strength.

- Fourth, collaboration should proceed with an understanding that frontline faculty members and staff should drive the processes of curriculum development, teaching and assessment to ensure that education practices are effective and practical in the real-life classroom.

The AFT student success report delineates a number of common elements of student success cutting across different programs and disciplines that the union believes can be viewed as a framework for the type of educational experience all students should have in some form. Those elements, described in greater detail in the report, include:

- Exposure to ***knowledge*** in a variety of areas;
- The development of ***intellectual abilities*** necessary for gathering information and processing it; and
- ***Applied skills***, both professional and technical. These elements are laid out in a chart on page XX.

In our view, these elements offer one acceptable framework (certainly not the only one) to focus professional thinking, collaboration and planning around curriculum, teaching and assessment. In any case, however, the specific categories and details are not the most important thing. The most important thing is to have a deliberative and intentional perspective among individual faculty members and the institution's body of faculty based on advance planning and collaboration—and also on the evidence from focus groups that students want and benefit from a high degree of clarity and interconnection in their coursework.

Implementation

To ensure that curriculum and assessment materials translate into real gains for students, the report recommends that:

- Faculty should be responsible for leading discussions about how the elements of student success are further articulated and refined to help students at their institution succeed.

- The implementation process should respect the principles of academic freedom.

- Professional staff should be closely involved in the process, particularly with regard to how the elements will be articulated vis-à-vis academic advising and career counseling.

- Implementing common elements for student success not only should respect differences among disciplines and programs, but also should strive for an integrated educational experience for students.

- New curriculum frameworks, assessments or accountability mechanisms should not re-create the wheel;

- Assessing the effectiveness of this process should focus on student success, academic programs and student services but should not be used to evaluate the performance of individual faculty or staff.

Roles, Responsibilities and Accountability

AFT members overwhelmingly favor reasonable accountability mechanisms; they also believe that accountability needs to flow naturally from clearly delineated responsibilities, including the responsibility faculty and staff have in the learning process. It takes the work of many stakeholders to produce a successful educational experience. Each stakeholder has unique responsibilities as well as a shared responsibility to work collaboratively with the other stakeholders. This report puts forward a listing of roles and responsibilities focused on four groups of stakeholders—faculty and staff members, institutional administrators, students and government. Under this kind of rubric, individual stakeholders have clear responsibilities for which they can be held accountable, and no individual stakeholder is solely responsible for achieving ends only partly in his or her control.

Retention and Attainment

Much of the policy debate on accountability has been tied to the idea that college attainment and completion rates are too low. Even though the measurement of graduation rates is deeply flawed, AFT members fully agree that retention is not what it should be and that some action must be taken to improve the situation. Our recommendations include:

1. ***Strengthen preparation in preK-12 by increasing the public support provided to school systems and the professionals who work in them***. As noted earlier, college faculty and staff at the postsecondary and preK-12 levels should be provided financial and professional support to coordinate standards between the two systems and minimize disjunctions.

2. ***Strengthen federal and state student assistance so students can afford to enter college and remain with their studies despite other obligations.*** Again, students report that paying for college is an overwhelming challenge, and that they must work a significant number of hours to support their academic career, often at the expense of fully benefiting from their classes. We cannot expect to keep balancing the books in higher education by charging students out-of-reach tuition and dismantling government and institutional support for a healthy system of academic staffing.

3. ***Institute or expand student success criteria along the lines of the student success elements described earlier (or an equally valid one).*** This is best based on deliberate, multidisciplinary planning in individual institutions led by frontline faculty and staff. Given that another one of students' most called-for needs is assistance with developing a clear path toward their education goals, the aim is to provide clarity to the educational experience for students along with other stakeholders, including government and the general public.

4. ***Coordinate learning objectives with student assessment.*** The desire to compare learning across different institutions on a single scale is understandable. However, we believe that student learning would be diminished, not enhanced, by administering national assessments that overly homogenize "success" to what is easily measurable and comparable.

5. ***Provide greater government funding and reassess current expenditure policies to increase support for instruction and staffing.*** We cannot expect student success when institutions are not devoting resources to a healthy staffing system and are allowing students' education to be built on the exploitation of contingent labor and the loss of full-time jobs. The system of higher education finance needs to be re-examined so colleges and universities can fulfill the nation's higher education attainment goals.

6. ***Improve the longitudinal tracking of students*** as they make their way through the educational system and out into the world beyond. The current federal graduation formula is much too narrow. We need to look at all students over a more substantial period of time, and we have to take into account the great diversity in student goals if we are to account properly for student success.

In conclusion, the AFT believes that academic unions, working with other stakeholders, can play a central role in promoting student success. Making lasting progress, however, will have to begin at tables where faculty and staff members hold a position of respect and leadership. This student success report is scarcely the last word on the subject—it is, in fact, the union's first word on the subject, and we expect many ideas presented here to be refined in conversations all over the country. The important thing is that those conversations about student success start taking place in many more places than they are today.

The National Discussion

Half a century ago, the United States undertook a historic commitment to make an affordable college education available to all Americans, regardless of their financial means. At the federal level, this commitment led to the establishment of a structure of student financial assistance that has grown more and more elaborate over the years. At the state level, the commitment to college access for all resulted in the opening and funding of thousands of public universities and community colleges. Hundreds of thousands of college students, most of whom would never have been able to attend college in another era, have taken successful advantage of these policies. The federal and state commitment to public higher education has been one of the clearest public policy successes in American history.

Today, more students than ever are attending community colleges and universities. There has been a recent upsurge in college enrollment spurred in part by the state of the economy from 2008 to 2010. At the same time, however, the ability of public higher education to accommodate growing enrollment has been handicapped in critical ways. College costs continue to rise. State and local governments have decreased their level of investment in public colleges and universities, and institutions have responded by cutting back the share of spending directed to instruction. Government disinvestment has resulted in higher tuitions which, in turn, have left students assuming unreasonable levels of debt to attend college and, worse, prevented many from enrolling altogether or persisting in their studies. Funding for federal student assistance, until just recently, failed to keep pace with rising costs, and the recent gains made to the federal Pell Grant program are always in danger of being rolled back. Students from racial and ethnic minorities and other first-generation college students have suffered most from these inadequacies.

With enrollments on the rise and without a comparable public investment in higher education, the capacity of public colleges and universities to serve students is now strained beyond the limit. Unfortunately, it is becoming commonplace to see academic programs curtailed or eliminated and corners being cut on student services in an attempt to maintain a "bare bones" budget. To meet the influx of students, instructional staffing is being built increasingly on a part-time and full-time corps of "contingent" faculty members without permanent jobs and without basic economic and professional supports. America is no longer the world leader in college attainment. Student retention rates are far lower than educators want or the nation should accept.

At the same time, one fact is still incontrovertible: Most people who complete a postsecondary degree or certificate program[1] do better in every aspect of their lives. In March 2004, the national average total personal income of workers 25 and older with a bachelor's degree was $48,417, roughly $23,000 higher than for those with a high school diploma. For those with an associate's degree, the average total personal income of workers 25 and older was $32,470, still $7,400 more than those with a high school

1. See, for instance, The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education (2005) by the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

diploma .[2] Providing greater opportunities for students from all walks of life to succeed in college needs to be a top issue on the national agenda.

Recognizing the growing importance of a college education, it is not surprising that public discussion and debate about student success issues is at an all-time high. This has been driven in part by the strong priority placed on higher education by the Obama administration. Overall, the emphasis on student success is a positive development. Our members fully agree that student retention is not as high as it should be, and they are eager to play a leading role in improving conditions.

However, with growing alarm, many of us have been following today's policy debates about student success issues such as curriculum, assessment and accountability. Unfortunately, some of the fevered discussion on this subject has not been as constructive as it could be, nor as grounded in the experiences of frontline educators as it should be. When it comes to generating solutions to the problems facing students and colleges, we have seen too heavy an emphasis on solutions that are overly simplistic and fail to address the reality on campus.

Too often, AFT members see proposals put forward to measure things because they are measurable, not because they really tell us anything new or important about the educational program. For example, our members often witness the imposition of "pay-for-performance" formulas that define institutional success primarily in terms of a high graduation rate. This is problematic for a number of reasons: first, because the graduation formula is notoriously flawed (see inset) and also because pay-for-performance programs can create perverse incentives for institutions either to lower their educational standards (to achieve a higher graduation or job placement rate) or, conversely, to raise their entrance requirements so they can "cherry pick" students who are likely to give them high graduation numbers.

There are further issues. One is the proliferation of accountability proposals designed around the perspective that higher education can be seen and assessed through the same lens as elementary and secondary education. In fact, the two levels of education are fundamentally different. Elementary and secondary education is mandatory and aimed primarily at producing a somewhat uniform set of education outcomes grade by grade. Higher education, on the other hand, is pursued and paid for by adults who choose institutions and programs to meet their own very diverse education and career goals. This diversity is a great strength of American colleges and universities, and therefore our members are concerned that overstandardizing assessment would weaken rather than strengthen education.

In the same vein, a great deal of discussion about accountability seems to focus on producing exactly comparable data among all disciplines and all institutions. This perspective, in turn, has led to the generation of a number of standardized student assessments despite very mixed expert opinion of their reliability and value.[3] Too often, AFT members report that they are facing the imposition of standardized tests, which they believe to be divorced from the institution's learning program and insensitive to the variety of education objectives in different disciplines. For example, tests such as the Collegiate Learning Assessment may offer some valuable information pertaining to a particular sample of students in a specific time or place. However, questions have been raised about whether the CLA is a reliable assessment of the growth in student learning from one year to the next—our members are concerned about whether it is appropriate to draw sweeping conclusions

FEDERAL GRADUATION RATE FORMULA

THE MOST GLARING EXAMPLE OF THE DISTANCE between policy and reality is the current federal graduation-rate formula, which serves as the basis of a great deal of higher education policymaking. The problem is that the federal graduation formula fails to account for more than half of today's undergraduates and therefore presents a skewed picture of what is going on in the classroom, particularly at institutions serving large numbers of nontraditional students. No attainment formula could capture all the nuances of student attainment, but the federal graduation-rate formula would be much more accurate if it tracked students for a longer period of time and if it tracked part-time students, students who transfer from one college to another, students who do not finish their degrees within 150 percent of the "normal" time, and the many students who are seeking neither a degree nor a certificate but who attend classes to pick up job skills or for personal enrichment.

2. Ibid.

3. See Trudy Banta's "A Warning on Measuring Learning Outcomes" (2007): www.insidehighered.com/views/2007/01/26/banta

"What goes wrong with so many curriculum, teaching and assessment proposals is caused by the fact that classroom educators...are not often at the center of the program development process."

from student samples and employ those conclusions to evaluate institution-wide student learning and teacher performance.

The AFT believes that a lot of what goes wrong with so many curriculum, teaching and assessment proposals is caused by the fact that classroom educators—along with their knowledge of pedagogy and experience with students—are not often at the center of the program development process. **The perspective of frontline educators should assume a much more prominent role in public discussion about student success and about the most appropriate forms of accountability for assessing it.**

Frontline faculty and staff can contribute greatly to the development of policies that expand student access and success while preserving the fundamental aspects of a successful college experience—a diverse offering of degree and certificate programs in which students can learn in ways that best suit them, one in which assessment and accountability mechanisms support student learning as the rich and complex experience we in the classroom know it to be. We do not want to be left with a major investment of resources that produces nothing more than a complicated, time-consuming maze of data that tells us little or nothing of importance about student learning but reorients college curricula to a lowest-common-denominator, teach-to-the-test curriculum.

Finally, it seems clear that policymakers, policy analysts and frontline educators are often talking past one another on issues of student success and accountability or, more frequently, not really talking at all. We need to break down these walls to search for the best solutions to the challenges facing our students. Educators and all the other higher education stakeholders need to talk more frequently and candidly about these issues with open minds and a willingness to consider different perspectives.

The Elements Of Student Success

Everyone agrees that the higher education curriculum, teaching, assessment and accountability all need to be focused squarely on student success. At the same time, everyone does not agree on what student success actually means. Some analysts emphasize the achievement of a baccalaureate degree; others are engaged in a national drive to expand the number of community and technical college degrees. Still others emphasize the need to increase opportunities to attain formal training certifications.

AFT members, however, usually think of student success somewhat more broadly—defining student success as the achievement of the student's own education goals. Our members teach not only students who may be on track to obtain degrees or certificates, but they also teach students who are looking primarily for job training without earning a formal credential or to acquire professional skills to enhance their career opportunities. Other students are studying academic subjects strictly for learning's sake. Adding to the complexity, students often adjust their goals throughout their college years.

That is why we believe that measuring student success solely in terms of degree attainment reflects a misunderstanding of today's academy. To understand the realities of student success, the AFT believes we must begin to identify ways to assess student academic goals throughout the educational pathway and—specifically called for by the students who participated in our focus groups—ensure that students have multiple opportunities to assess and reassess their goals through a rich process of advisement or counseling. In short, we believe agreement needs to be reached among stakeholders on what student success encompasses and how information on student success can be acquired.

The next question, then, is how to continually strengthen the learning experience for students. Are there particular frameworks or ways of doing things that best promote success, given that the one constant in higher education is diversity, not uniformity? Over the last year, AFT Higher Education leaders worked to uncover common elements of student success, cutting across different programs and disciplines, that can be viewed as a framework for the type of educational experience all students should have in some form. In doing so, we found that although there are many different curriculum rubrics going around education circles, there is actually a great deal of consensus about the elements of good learning. Those elements, we believe, include (1) exposure to **knowledge** in a variety of areas, (2) the development of **intellectual abilities** necessary for gathering information and processing it, and (3) **applied professional and technical skills**. The chart on the next page elaborates on this.

These elements, it should be noted, emphasize the importance of connecting theoretical and practical learning. The balance of academic material and the learning context obviously will differ substantially in different education settings, particularly between strictly academic and career-oriented programs. For example, a student studying computer-assisted design at a community college with the goal of attaining a one-year certificate will experience a different mix and depth of the elements than a student studying anthropology at a research university with the goal of attaining a master's degree. Even in the most training-oriented coursework, however, good programs will work to incorporate broad perspectives into the curriculum because understanding them will enhance the professional and personal success of students in any walk of life.

ELEMENTS OF STUDENT SUCCESS

KNOWLEDGE	INTELLECTUAL ABILITIES	PROFESSIONAL/TECHNICAL SKILLS
All students should achieve an appropriate level of knowledge in a particular field of study and have a level of exposure to: ■ Knowledge of the physical and natural world ■ Intercultural knowledge and competence ■ Civic knowledge and engagement ■ Ethics reasoning	A broad set of intellectual abilities is crucial for all students, including the ability to integrate these skills and apply them in both academic and practical contexts. These abilities include: ■ Critical inquiry ■ Creative thinking ■ Problem solving ■ Independent learning ■ Data manipulation ■ Analysis and assessment of information ■ Synthesis	Students should gain the ability to apply the knowledge learned in a particular field of study and also have a broad set of skills that will serve them in both academic and professional settings. These skills include: ■ Written communications ■ Oral communications ■ Quantitative literacy ■ Information literacy ■ Teamwork skills

The elements of student success listed above offer one way (certainly not the only way) to focus professional thinking, collaboration and planning around the institution's teaching program and assessment. There are several other frameworks in play that address similar issues. The framework here is not posed in conflict or even in contradistinction to any other. The AFT hopes that our members and other stakeholders find this perspective helpful. The important thing, however, is not any particular rubric but to begin, continue or improve a deliberative and intentional process for achieving student success based on the evidence that students want and would benefit from a high degree of clarity and interconnection in their coursework.

Implementation

Although there appears to be much consensus on the elements of student learning, our members are concerned that most plans follow either a multi-institutional or top-down model (or both) in implementing student learning plans, and this makes for frameworks that cannot be carried out effectively on the ground. Because institutional missions and student bodies are so diverse, and because it is always important to capitalize on the mix of expertise at each institution, our members strongly believe that the process of program development should be conducted at the college or university level, although guidelines developed by disciplinary organizations or other scholars may certainly inform the process. Frontline faculty members should drive this process in order to ensure that educational practices are effective and practical in the classroom. The union believes effective implementation needs to be based on the following guidelines:

1. Faculty should be responsible for leading any discussions about how the elements of student success are further articulated and refined to help students at their institution succeed.

2. The implementation process should respect the principles of academic freedom.

3. Discussions about implementation should begin within disciplines and programs and then expand to the wider institutional curriculum. This is essential because it makes much more sense to find commonalities at the disciplinary level and then work up toward the institutional level, rather than forcing a top-down fit.

4. Professional staff should be involved in the process, particularly with regard to how the elements will be articulated vis-à-vis academic advising and career counseling.

5. Discussions about implementing common elements for student success not only should respect differences among disciplines and programs, but also strive for an integrated educational experience for students.

6. Faculty and staff work on these issues constantly, so any work that already has been done must be acknowledged rather than approaching implementation as reinventing the wheel.

7. Discussions should include not only how to refine the elements to set appropriate goals for students in various programs and at the institution in general, but should also include curriculum design, teaching methods and assessments.

8. Assessing the effectiveness of this process should focus on student success, academic programs and activities as well as on student services, and not be used to evaluate the performance of individual faculty or staff.

"Our members strongly believe that the process of program development should be conducted at the college or university level."

Roles and Responsibilities for Achieving Student Success

IT TAKES THE WORK OF MANY STAKEHOLDERS TO PRODUCE A SUCCESSFUL EDUCATIONAL experience. Each stakeholder has unique responsibilities as well as the shared responsibility to work collaboratively with one another. Below is a summary framework of the responsibilities of higher education institutions, faculty and staff members, government agencies and students themselves in producing a successful educational experience. These roles and responsibilities, in turn, can serve as the basis of evaluating the institution's success in meeting its goals.

Institutions of Higher Education

The organizational structure for advancing and certifying higher learning in our society rests with public and private institutions of higher education. The leadership of these institutions is responsible for building and continually replenishing the structures and conditions that promote student success. Institutional leadership, then, is responsible (and therefore accountable) for:

1. Securing adequate funding for the institution and once that funding is obtained, ensuring that it is targeted first and foremost to instruction and support services that help students advance toward their goals. At the same time, administrators should advocate to keep tuition down and take whatever actions are possible to ensure affordability, particularly by examining administrative costs.

2. Developing a structure and level of instructional staffing that advances student success and creates a secure professional environment for good teaching and scholarship. As noted earlier, colleges and universities have greatly diminished the proportion of full-time tenured teaching positions in favor of developing an instructional workforce largely made up of contingent faculty employees, particularly part-time/adjunct faculty members, who are accorded very poor pay, very little professional support, few or no benefits, little or no job security, and few or no academic freedom protections. The problem is that these instructors often are not expected to perform many of the most essential duties of faculty—and, in the absence of a union contract, almost always not paid for performing them—such as meeting with students to provide support and counsel and mentoring. This structure is detrimental to students, particularly at-risk students who need informed, consistent assistance in making their way to degrees and certificates.

We must recognize that an important part of the institutional responsibility for student success consists of collaborating with government and other stakeholders to expand full-time faculty opportunities and to ensure that *all* faculty members have living wages, job security, office space, benefits, professional development, and fair and transparent evaluation practices.

3. Maintaining effective procedures to ensure that curriculum, teaching and assessment are faculty driven. Most particularly, institutions are responsible for ensuring that academic policy decisions are based on the principle of shared governance and that protections are in place to enhance academic freedom, including due process, job security and tenure or tenure-like protections. Given that contingent faculty are teaching most of the undergraduate courses in this country, access to shared governance

and protection of academic freedom must extend to all instructors.

4. Building support-service structures that advance student success. Strong student services such as advising and mentoring, professional development for faculty and staff, and technological support are critical elements in helping students succeed. Institutions should build structures that facilitate continual interchange between faculty and staff members in regard to sorting out responsibilities and following the progress of individual students.

5. Supporting and coordinating recurring institution-wide reviews of progress in carrying out the student success agenda. Student success should be an institutional priority. Institutions should commit to supporting annual (or more frequent) meetings at which faculty across departments can come together to share their best practices for improving student learning and ensuring student success. Frontline educators, obviously, should play the leading role in this process.

6. Maintaining and enforcing the standards of student responsibility listed below. Institutions should develop clear standards for holding students accountable for their own learning, and then communicate those standards in ways that are easy for students to understand and act on.

7. Ensuring public transparency on such matters as program and degree options, student attainment and course scheduling. Along these lines, institutions should not shrink from revealing information that uncovers problems, including budget and fiscal management problems, as well as information that might point the way to improvement.

8. Helping to improve pathways from preK-12 to college. College readiness is a significant factor in student success and sometimes falters because the two systems are administered separately. Institutions need to work with school districts; secure grant funds and other sources of aid to facilitate program development; and work with faculty and staff, through institutional procedures and collective bargaining contracts, to offer significant professional rewards for faculty and staff to undertake this work.

Faculty and Staff Members

Faculty and staff members are responsible for:

1. Working individually and collaboratively with their colleagues, tenured and nontenured, full-time and part-time, to develop challenging curricula that are academically strong and provide the tools students will need to be successful in their lives when they leave the institution.

- As noted earlier, producing good educational results is strengthened when faculty members and staff have regular opportunities to think in a coordinated, "intentioned" way about their coursework. This includes the coursework's relevance to the world students will face outside academia, about the best methods to incorporate such skills into their teaching and how to assess the degree to which these goals are achieved.

  Regular opportunities should be taken to obtain the views of stakeholders such as students and business representatives, disciplinary associations, civic leaders and other community organizations about the efficacy of the educational program although, in the final analysis, education decisions should be driven by educators.

2. Being available and providing proactive help to students in puzzling out the requirements of the academic program and the course subject matter. Here again, an academic staffing structure that limits the contributions of part-time/adjunct and other contingent faculty members precludes opportunities for students that can be crucial to their success. Accessibility and availability of instructors is a critical factor in student success, especially in the first year or two of college and especially for underprepared college students. At the same time, students and administrators alike should understand that the availability of either full- or part-time faculty members needs to be encompassed in a manageable, flexible workload.

3. Advising students on their career goals and the consequences of the choices they make (e.g., the number and nature of courses taken, the number of hours devoted to study, the number of hours worked to help finance their education, etc.) on the students' ability to meet their academic goals. This applies both to faculty members and to professional staff.

4. Offering early and continual feedback and formative and summative assessment of student progress. In particular, faculty should employ assessment tools that assess students' understanding of course content and learning styles early in the term, and create incentives for students to engage with faculty early and often during the course.

5. Participating actively in institution-wide reviews of progress in carrying out a student success agenda.

6. Pressing the college administration to ensure that policy decisions are based on the principles of shared governance, academic freedom and due process. Again, access to shared governance and protection of academic freedom must extend to all instructors.

7. Supporting individual faculty members in attaining professional development, improving their pedagogy and technological skills, and strengthening other aspects of the faculty skill set.

Students

To further their own success, students must be responsible, among other things, for:

1. Attending classes and keeping up with their coursework. Students must understand that the minimum time commitment required for success in their courses is generally two hours on top of every classroom hour.

2. Engaging professionals in discussions about students' coursework and their educational and career goals. It is imperative that students regularly seek out faculty, academic and career counselors outside of class. If students encounter difficulty gaining access to these professionals, they should make this known to the institution.

3. Periodically taking a hard look at their academic and career goals, the time commitments they undertake and the state of their finances to ensure that they develop a program of study that has a good prospect for success.

Government

Government's primary responsibility is to provide the financial support institutions and students need to, respectively, provide and receive a high-quality education. As we noted earlier, government, particularly state government, has not been fulfilling this responsibility effectively in recent years.

1. Public institutions need to be provided sufficient public funding to support institutional operations (traditionally a state responsibility) and to ensure that college is affordable for their students (both a state and federal responsibility). Instead, most states have pursued a policy of disinvestment in education and public services. This has left those of us in higher education facing impossible choices.

A real and lasting solution to the problems of college student retention and attainment will not be achieved without greater government support.

2. State governments need to make sure that colleges and universities are properly staffed to ensure student success. One of the most glaring failures of government policy over the last generation has been the failure to strengthen academic staffing so as to build the ranks of full-time tenure-track faculty or provide adequate financial and professional support to contingent faculty members. The AFT supports a comprehensive national campaign called the Faculty and College Excellence initiative (FACE) to address the staffing crisis through legislation, political action, collective bargaining, research and communications. (See our website at **aftface.org**.)

3. Government needs to put structures in place ensuring that institutions provide a high-quality educational program for their students. Traditionally, government has wisely avoided direct intervention at the institutional level, relying instead on an extensive, decentralized system of self-regulation by private accrediting agencies to fulfill much of this responsibility. However, the growth in attention to accountability issues during the past decade has led to a great many proposals—some from people in government, some from institutional organizations, some from individual academics, think tanks and foundations, some from accrediting agencies—to impose more direct and measurable quality criteria for curriculum, teaching and assessment.

Government has an obligation to hold institutions accountable for achieving demonstrably good results—our members believe this very strongly. However, there are more promising ways and less promising ways to achieve quality. In our experience, practices that rely on criteria developed without the participation of frontline faculty usually fail in practice because they are not connected to the realities of the classroom or tailored to the differing missions and strengths of individual institutions.

4. The states and the federal government both need to ensure that students are not subject to fraud and abuse. This applies with particular force to profit-making colleges that often appear to be more committed to taking student tuition dollars than giving students a high-quality education.

5. Governments at the state and the federal levels should collect data that can be useful to institutions, students and their families on key factors such as cost, student financial assistance and college attainment. As noted earlier, the graduation rate formula used by the federal government is fatally flawed and should be abandoned or altered to reflect the realities of the educational progress of today's students. But even as the states and the federal government collect more information about the educational experience of individual students, there need to be controls on how information is collected and used to ensure student privacy and to prevent governments from being overly involved in academic decision-making and assessment.

6. Last but certainly not least, the federal government needs to maintain a healthy structure of student financial assistance that keeps pace with college costs and makes college affordable for students who are not from affluent families. For many years, the purchasing power of financial aid programs was permitted to languish, which made a near mockery of the national commitment to educational access. One result, for many students, is the need to work excessively while in college to pay tuition, which studies have shown has a harmful effect on academic achievement. Students who fail to enter college or who prematurely leave college overwhelmingly cite financial and family pressures—not academic concerns—as the most important reason for abandoning their education. Advocates of specific solutions, however, are obligated to demonstrate that the ideas they are putting forward will make an important difference in correcting the conditions that cause retention problems in the first place.

The College Retention Issue

As we noted before, much of today's public debate has focused on improving college student retention. We have described many problems in the ways by which retention is tracked, but it is nevertheless true that college student retention is too low and is a source of great concern to AFT members. In the past, colleges and universities answered questions about retention by asserting that American higher education was the most expansive and highest quality in the world. That is still largely true. However, in recent years, concern about accountability has been fueled by newer data indicating that U.S. college attainment rates have fallen over time and in relation to other countries. In addition, there are ample data demonstrating totally unacceptable attainment disparities among students from different racial and ethnic groups and economic strata. Short of lowering academic standards, our members will do everything possible to address this national problem.

It makes no sense to implement a raft of curriculum and assessment mechanisms if they do not have a substantial impact on the problem you are trying to solve. In that vein, we have examined what we consider to be the most significant obstacles to college student success.

- Inadequate academic preparation (a problem perceived more strongly by faculty and staff than by students);
- Inadequate student finances and college affordability, particularly for adult and other nontraditional students;
- Personal obligations such as a new child or an ill relative;
- Uncertainty about academic requirements. Students report that they often feel somewhat at sea about what courses they should be taking, how those courses relate to their post-college goals and what they need to do to be successful in class;
- Inaccessibility and inconvenience in terms of geography, the scheduling of courses and the availability of online options. At the same time, the community college students in our focus groups understood there is sometimes a trade-off between convenience, on the one hand, and high academic standards on the other—when trade-offs are necessary, the student focus groups overwhelmingly came down on the side of sticking with strong academic preparation.
- Difficulty in gaining access to faculty or staff who can clarify course requirements, help students overcome problems and advise on career paths.

Given these issues, it is not hard to envision the solutions.

1. ***Strengthen preparation in preK-12 by increasing the public support provided to school systems and the professionals who work in them***. As noted earlier, college faculty and staff at the postsecondary and preK-12 levels should be provided financial and professional support to coordinate standards between the two systems and minimize disjunctions.

2. ***Strengthen federal and state student assistance so students can afford to enter college and remain with their studies despite other obligations.*** Again, students report that paying for college is an overwhelming challenge and that they must work significant hours to support their academic career, often at the expense of fully benefiting from their classes. We cannot expect to keep balancing the books in higher education by charging students out-of-reach tuition and dismantling financial and professional support for a healthy system of academic staffing.

3. ***Institute or expand student success criteria along the lines of the construct described earlier (or an equally valid one).*** This is best based on deliberate, multidisciplinary planning at the institutional level. One of the aims is to provide the clarity students report they need to achieve their educational aspirations while providing greater transparency outside the academic community.

4. ***Coordinate learning objectives with student assessment.*** The desire to compare learning across different institutions on a single scale is understandable. However, we strongly believe that student learning would be diminished, not enhanced, by administering national assessments that overly homogenize "success" to what is easily measurable and comparable.

5. ***Provide greater government funding and reassess current expenditure policies to increase support for instruction and staffing.*** There must be an investment in a healthy staffing system rather than one built on the exploitation of contingent labor and the loss of full-time tenured faculty. The system of public higher education finance in the United States needs to be revamped so that colleges and universities have the capacity to fulfill the nation's attainment goals.

6. ***Improve the longitudinal tracking of students as they make their way through the education system and out into the world beyond.*** The current federal graduation formula is much too narrow. We need to look at all students over a more substantial period of time, and we have to account for the great diversity in student goals to account properly for student success.

All of us involved in higher education need to keep our eye on the ball when it comes to student retention. The union and its members will join with other stakeholders to clarify learning criteria and connect them to effective assessment. At the same time, if we concentrate too much on developing ever more elaborate learning criteria without addressing the enormous financial and staffing issues that impede retention, we are likely to wind up with a lot of words and a lot of bureaucracy but very little concrete improvement for students.

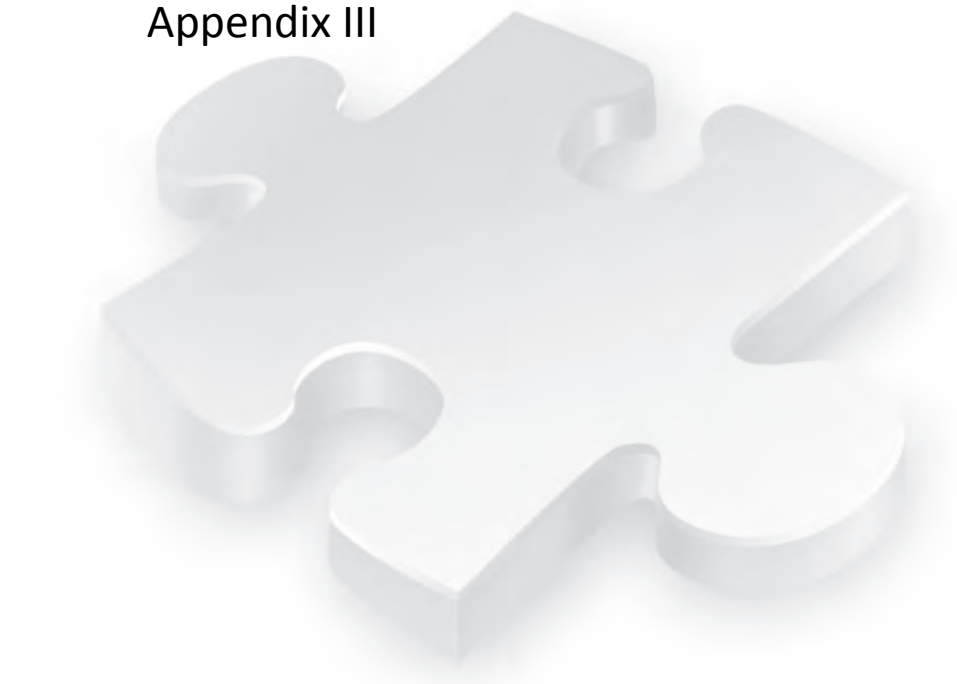
"The AFT will attempt to assist our campus affiliates in designing contracts, reward structures and other institutional policies that advance the success of the students we serve."

Conclusion

We believe that too many of today's policy discussions about higher education curriculum, teaching and assessment are not sufficiently connected to a clear set of understandings about what student success should look like or about what the appropriate roles and responsibilities of institutions, faculty and staff, students and government should be for achieving it. In this report, we have tried to offer a faculty and staff perspective that we hope will advance the national dialogue on these concerns. As this dialogue evolves, the AFT will welcome opportunities to continue engaging on these issues both inside and outside the union. The AFT will attempt to assist our campus affiliates in designing contracts, reward structures and other institutional policies that advance the success of the students we serve. We hope our members will be actively engaged in leading the discussion of student success issues at their institutions. Finally, we urge anyone reading this report to keep up periodically with AFT's What Should Count website at **www.whatshouldcount.org**.

"Accountability needs to flow naturally from clearly delineated responsibilities, including the responsibility faculty and staff have in the learning process."

Appendix III



Exploring Student Attitudes, Aspirations & Barriers to Success

Six focus groups among higher-risk first- and second-year community college and technical college students, and four-year university students

For the American Federation of Teachers: Higher Education

March 2011

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Preface

The *American Academic* series, published by the American Federation of Teachers, examines key issues affecting the workforce of our colleges and universities. The series has focused on the working conditions of full-time and contingent faculty, professional staff and graduate employees and on how those conditions affect the ability of higher education workers to meet the needs of students, conduct research, and fulfill the many diverse and important missions of our higher education system.

Volume One of the series examined the state of the academic workforce over the 10-year period from 1997 to 2007 and documented the continuing reliance on underpaid and undersupported contingent faculty and graduate employees, as well as the growth of professional staff. Volume Two presented the results of a national survey of part-time/adjunct faculty exploring the demographics of the contingent instructional force as well as their working conditions and their views and attitudes toward their work. In this report, the third in the series, we shift our focus from the educators themselves to those they educate: the students.

Much of the attention in policy discussions about higher education today is focused on how to help more students gain access to higher education and then succeed by attaining a degree or certificate. Over the years, most of the work focused on the access side of the equation, particularly on ensuring an adequate level of federal student aid as well as state institutional support. Today, the policy debate has increasingly shifted to what happens to students *after* they enter college—issues such as retention and evidence of learning outcomes. The emphasis has generally been centered on holding institutions accountable for achieving measurable outputs—such as graduation rates and standardized tests—and on the development of curricular frameworks of various sorts.

One problem with these discussions is that they have rarely included the views and experience of frontline faculty. Another problem is that the discussions often have not drawn enough on the views and experiences of students themselves. The research presented in this report is a set of direct questions about what students say they want and need to complete their studies effectively. To obtain this information, the AFT asked Lake Research Partners to conduct a series of focus groups with students, particularly first- and second-year students who met certain demographic criteria that might make them less likely to persist than the "traditional" student. What we heard was important—not because it is so surprising, but because it provides more evidence that our policy discussions must be centered on supporting students both financially and educationally.

As you will read, even though students have varying experiences, they face two overarching challenges in trying to succeed at a college or university. First, they report that paying for college is a continual—sometimes overwhelming—concern, especially for those who have numerous other financial obligations. This is interconnected with the issue of time; many students are working significant hours and may not have the time they know is necessary to fully benefit from their classes. Third, students routinely identified a need for more academic counseling and advice to help them identify a clear and sensible path through their higher education. This desire for more personal attention from advisors and faculty alike undoubtedly has been exacerbated by the recent economic downturn in which student enrollment has increased;

meanwhile, the colleges and universities have fewer resources to staff advising and counseling offices and the number of faculty working full time at a single college continues to decline.

The focus groups described in this report tell us that if we are serious about improving higher education and increasing student success, then we will necessarily have to make sure that students have the financial support they need, and access to and time with the frontline educators—both staff and faculty—who are most responsible for their success. There seems to be no magic bullet that would diminish the need for a greater investment in college affordability and professional support.

Sandra Schroeder, President,
AFT Washington, AFL-CIO;
AFT Vice President; Chair, AFT Higher
Education Program and Policy Council

Summary

The American Federation of Teachers' (AFT) commissioned Lake Research Partners (LRP) to conduct focus group research among at-risk community college, technical college, and four-year college students to learn more about their higher education experiences and to inform the AFT's work to support success among this student population. As policymakers and elites across the country debate how to boost community, technical and four-year college success and completion, this focus group research had the objective of gathering information directly from students, to give voice to their experiences and needs in this area.

The first-and second-year college students in our focus group discussions are those that are higher-risk than other students for not finishing their studies or earning a degree. These students generally report their higher education experiences to be positive, challenging, and at many times difficult. They look to their respective colleges to help them succeed, and they view faculty and staff at their schools as integral to this process.

For the most part, these at-risk students feel their schools can help them succeed, but that often the school's systems, offices, and protocols can be difficult to navigate and self-reliance and self-efficacy are often critical in getting what they need. Many say help is available from their schools for any range of student-related problems, but often only when they ask for it more than once or go out of their way to seek it.

For the faculty's part, most students say their professors or instructors are a positive force on their behalf, helping them toward success. Students say most of their faculty members are engaged in their students' learning and care about helping their students succeed—but that they do so with varying levels of enthusiasm and engagement. Students say getting what they truly need and want from a course and a professor can often mean they have to go the extra mile to seek out help.

Defining success: These students describe two primary goals for attending college that play strong roles in how they define what success as a student will look like.

- **Getting a good job:** Their first goal is to be able to get a job that pays reasonably well and will be something that they find satisfying. Whether they had always planned on going to college, or have a current low-paying job, or children they want to better provide for, most in our discussions say they came to college because they feel they have to in order to have the kind of career, and security, they aspire to. They feel they have little choice otherwise.

- **Self-improvement:** The second primary goal students describe for being in school is to better themselves by becoming more academically well-rounded and to have opportunities for self-exploration and growth. This is more holistic and self-improvement-oriented than the goal of a good career. For the four-year university students in our discussions, many of whom are younger than the community or technical college students, this is a more pronounced and academically-oriented goal that also includes the desire to mature and "have fun." For the technical college and community college students, however, self-improvement is also a very strong goal.

Students see merit in both of these goals. They say both goals are important to them personally, and should be for their colleges, because too much focus on preparation for a specific career can limit one's intellectual development and ability to switch career paths. In the reverse, focusing only on academic development without the goal of career preparation can leave one with limited options after graduation as well. Even in the current economy, students place high importance on the self-improvement aspects of college.

Obstacles to success: Students report the biggest things they struggle with, and that can be sizeable stumbling blocks on their paths toward success, include:

- **Having enough money and financial aid to attend school,** which proves to be a more immediate concern for the community college and technical college students in our discussions than the four-year university students;

- **Lacking adequate academic guidance and advising**, which students say they need to help them understand the academic requirements, develop their goals, and plan and execute their coursework to meet those goals and requirements;

- **Lacking highly-developed "soft-skills,"** including strong study skills and time management skills, which play a large role in helping them maintain their self-discipline and motivation to study; and

- **The challenge of finding time and "balance,"** which can be multi-faceted for many students. Time comes through as one of the most valuable and scarcest resources in our exploration of student success. Because students' time is finite, and being a student is one among many of their roles and responsibilities—these students report that not having enough time constantly works against them. The time they have to spend being a student is time they are not spending at work and earning money, or tending to their familial or other personal responsibilities. Across the groups, students say they struggle constantly with how to balance their responsibilities and "get it all done."

The length of time that it takes to complete college can also be a barrier for the students in our discussions. The longer it takes to graduate, many say, the more chances there are for requirements for graduation to change, and for other things in life to come up and prevent one from finishing. The length of time it may take to finish, with potential pay-offs so far in the future, can also dampen one's motivation. This appears more common among the community college students than the four-year university students in our discussions.

Other obstacles discussed by students, but to a somewhat lesser extent, include:

- **General education requirements,** some of which can dampen many students' overall motivation and excitement about college because they often seem irrelevant to their major or area of interest. At the same time, students also acknowledge that having some general education requirements can help them become well-rounded and help them better pick a major.

- **Large class sizes, over-enrollment:** Some students, especially those enrolled in four-year universities in our discussions, list large class sizes as problematic. Some students also complain about over-enrollment at their schools, which, they say, can lead to larger classes, less financial aid to go around, and more strain on their support structures, including advisors and tutors.

- **Limited course offerings,** which prevent some students from taking the courses they need (or want), when they need to take them, can set students behind in their course of study, and some say limits their ability to take courses that could be truly beneficial. They also complain that this can lead to being in school for longer periods and accruing even more debt. Lack of guidance in how to navigate limited course offerings, some students say, worsens this problem.

- **The need for more tutoring that** is less crowded or with a tutor that is well-versed in what they need help with.

- **The need for more face-time with professors:** Some students cite as an obstacle their not being able to access their professors adequately or their professors being too stretched for time.

- **Fast-pace:** Some technical college students say that the fast pace of the teaching and large amount of material they have to cover in every class can be a barrier. This is reported particularly by those studying information technology or computer-related fields.

These students also say time plays a large role in the availability of part-time/adjunct faculty at their schools. From a student perspective, we do not see a strong awareness of whether their professors are employed on a part-time or adjunct basis and most students perceive little difference in the quality of the professor's teaching based on whether they are employed full-time or part-time by the school. Yet, students in our discussions do tend to feel that many part-time/adjunct faculty are less available for students because they are not on campus all the time or have other jobs that make them less available for office hours.

Online courses: Many of the students in our discussions say that they prefer courses taught largely in-person, although many have had positive experiences with "hybrid" courses which include online components. In contrast, many students see courses that are conducted solely or almost entirely online as more of a negative because they feel more "self-taught" and many find it difficult to get their questions answered. Feeling like they have to teach themselves the material is especially frustrating, they say, for a course they pay to take. There is also the sense that they would not want to take core courses, such as math, strictly online because of the lack of assistance and faculty availability.

Some students describe successful experiences with online coursework, especially for courses that were not a part of their major or that seemed less personally important. Many students also say online coursework offers them flexibility and convenience, which allow them to take courses that otherwise would not fit into their work, family, and school schedules. Yet, even many of the students who acknowledge these positives say they would often rather take in-person classes if given the choice.

Remedies: This focus group research reveals many potential opportunities for schools and policymakers to better help students who are at-risk of dropping out to succeed and finish their schooling. Two of the strongest opportunities, as conveyed by the students in our discussions, are:

- **Getting more help to pay for their education—**either through grants or scholarships, or other forms of aid. Students also say they could greatly benefit from more accessible and user-friendly financial aid offices and resources.

- **More informative and accessible guidance and advising** is called for by all types of students, including four-year university, community college, and technical college students. These students strongly support this help coming in the form of more full-time academic advisors, and they are also open to getting this from their professors and instructors. Students also see room for this in the form of career counseling and career development offices that are more integrated into their academic advising and major program of study.

On a second tier are remedies that many students across the groups say would be helpful, including:

- **Refining general education requirements** to give students more flexibility and options in choosing general education requirement courses that are applicable to their major fields of study and in-line with their interests. Students also desire more guidance in finding and registering for courses that fit these criteria.

- **Having more course offerings** to help students finish in the appropriate number of years for the degree, and to help them fit the classes they need into their tight schedules, which usually involves juggling work and family commitments.

- **Having faculty more accessible** for student questions and assistance. There is some recognition that employing more full-time faculty and lowering class sizes could improve accessibility.

- **Normalizing and encouraging students to seek help**, including going to tutoring, attending professor office hours, and asking for more in-depth feedback from professors. The students in our discussions know this is available and, in fact, were sometimes critical of themselves for not being more proactive. At the same time, they say it would be helpful for the college culture to promote more professor-student interactions, assistance, and feedback as the norm, rather than something students only do when they need extra help.

- **Offering pre-orientation programs to more students, or strengthening orientation programs:** Students who attended a summer pre-orientation program report that these were especially helpful in teaching them study skills and time management skills, setting their expectations for coursework, developing supportive peer and mentor relationships, and getting acquainted with the college campus and workings.

- **Providing more and improved career-specific equipment or opportunities:** Four-year university students in specific trade-oriented majors—like computer science or sports therapy—as well as technical college students, say they would benefit from having more trade-specific equipment and career experiences available.

Methodology | Objectives

In 2010, the American Federation of Teachers asked LRP to conduct focus group research among at-risk community college, technical college, and four-year college students to learn about their higher education experiences, how they view student success and aspects that make succeeding difficult, as well as easier. In the focus groups we explored factors that can help or hinder student success, either from the school or from other outside sources, and we also explored possible solutions to help ease students' path to success.

LRP conducted six focus groups in November and December 2010 in three locations—Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, Seattle, Washington, and Millersville, Pennsylvania. The groups were conducted among a segment of students whose demographic, family, and socio-economic backgrounds make them more at-risk for not finishing their schooling. In all groups except for the working, independent students group, all participants met two of the three following criteria, placing them at higher risk for not finishing school: 1) were working at a non-academically-related job for 20 hours a week or more; 2) reported that neither of their parents attended college; or 3) were receiving need-based financial grants to help pay for their schooling (such as Pell grants).

All participants were first- and second-year students at public community colleges, technical colleges, and four-year universities. Students were between the ages of 18 and 40, from a mix of academic backgrounds and major areas of study, and were a mix of genders, racial/ethnic backgrounds, and parents and non-parents. (See Focus Group Composition in Table 1; Table 2 at the end of this report outlines further characteristics of focus group participants).

Statement of Limitations

In opinion research the focus group seeks to develop insight and direction rather than quantitatively precise or absolute measures. Because of the limited number of respondents and the restrictions of recruiting, this research must be considered in a qualitative frame of reference.

Focus groups cannot be considered reliable or valid in the statistical sense. This type of research is intended to provide knowledge, awareness, attitudes, and opinions about issues and concerns.

You may find that some of the information seems inconsistent in character on your first reading of this report. These inconsistencies should be considered as valid data from the participant's point of view. That is, the participant may be misinformed or simply wrong in their knowledge or judgment and we should interpret this as useful information about their level of understanding.

The following biases are inherent in focus group research and are stated here to remind each reader that the data from focus groups cannot be projected to any universe of individuals.

Bias 1. Participants who respond to the invitation of a stranger to participate in this research show themselves to be risk takers and may be somewhat more assertive than non-participants.

Bias 2. Participants who speak most often and forcefully in focus group sessions may be more articulate and willing to express opinions in a group than non-participants or quieter group members.

Bias 3. Participants "self-select" themselves, i.e., they are those people who are available on the day a particular group was scheduled.

Bias 4. Participants were not selected randomly so that each person in the pool of possible participants did not have an equal chance to be selected.

Bias 5. People in groups may respond differently to a question than if asked that same question individually. They may follow the lead of a strong speaker or someone they perceive as "expert."

Table 1: Focus Group Composition

Philadelphia	Group 1: Latino & African-American students at an urban Philadelphia community college	Group 2: Students at a four-year urban university, mix of races
Seattle	Group 3: Students attending an urban Seattle community college, and who are currently enrolled or in past year enrolled in a developmental education course, mix of races Group 5: Working students who are not claimed as dependents on parents' taxes (thus, "independent") and who attend community college in urban and outer-urban Seattle, mix of races	Group 4: Students attending a technical college in suburban Seattle, mix of races
Millersville, PA	Group 6: Students at a four-year regional university, mix of races	

Context

The college students in our discussions generally seem content about being enrolled in college and the direction of their studies, but they also report some negative emotions regarding their college careers, ranging from boredom, to anxiety, frustration, to feeling overwhelmed. While some feel directionless or frustrated with the time, costs, and effort required, many are also motivated and feel their investment will be worth it.

> "I think definitely just knowing that when I am at work and I am hating it, I am like, 'okay, I am not going to be doing this for the rest of my life.' I am working on my education so that I can have something that I want." – *Community college student, Seattle*
>
> "You know you are educating yourself. You know you are preparing yourself for the world out there. And [gaining] security." – *Technical college student, Seattle*
>
> "Just the idea that you are going toward something, that you are on your way to pursue your goals." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "It was hard. I just really did it because I just felt, 'Well, I have to do it now because [otherwise] I will never do it.'" – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

There is a muted optimism across the students in our discussions that they can and will finish the degree they are working toward, or for some community college students transfer to a four-year university. Many in our discussions feel strapped for time, money, and sleep, and face other challenges that serve to dampen their mood and energy, but do not completely darken their outlooks. Their largest concerns are a mixture of things directly and indirectly related to their learning and academics. The top concerns students report across the groups are having enough money to pay for school (and everything else), doing well in their courses—which means passing for some and excelling for others, getting what they need out of college to get the job and career they want, and trying to "get it all done," including balancing their school work and their responsibilities, often including work and family.

> "I have so much work that I can't go out. It's like I am not living the college experience because I can't go out because I have to do work or else I fall behind." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "It's a lot to deal with. Like making sure you work and have a job and do well in your classes." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*
>
> "It's really hard to balance work and school." – *Technical college student, Seattle*
>
> "Knowing that it is an open door, but to get to that open door, it's just like you are running track. You get a half a mile and then just knowing in the future it will haunt you [if you give up]." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

The students express a mixture of perspectives on whether they were sufficiently prepared for college when they arrived. Some students say they felt reasonably well-prepared for the experience either by their high schools or through their work experiences before college, while others complain that their high school education did a poor job of preparing them. Regardless, all of the students say adjustments were necessary when

they entered college. Many mention that encountering their first research paper and figuring out how to tackle the large amount of reading or other assignments were new challenges for them, but they felt much more capable after getting through the first round of these tasks.

> "When I first started, it was just a real adjustment because I had been out of school for ten years. Like I couldn't handle it, but now I am adjusting and you know now I know what I have to do and what is expected of me and so I can juggle things better. Because I know at first it was just like a real adjustment because it was like a shock for my system." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I went to a pretty good high school… they focused on getting you into college, but I still could not write a college-level essay. And no one told me. I was still getting A's [in high school], but once I got a professor who didn't…she grabbed one of my papers and said that's not right. That forced me to go back and learn to teach myself." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I think academically I was prepared; I think that the freshman year of college is really just a logical progression from senior year of high school, but kind of mentally, I don't think I was prepared. I didn't really know what I wanted to do with my life." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

Student Goals

The two primary reasons the students in our discussions say they are in college are: one, to be able to get a good career, and two, for self-growth and improvement.

- **Career:** Across the groups students say one of their main goals for going to school and graduating is to be able to get a job that pays reasonably well, and in a line of work that they can enjoy doing. These students say they are going to school because they believe they have go to college to get the good job, regardless of the type of school or academic program in which they are in enrolled – and they feel they have little choice otherwise. For some students this is just part of the course they had always imagined for their lives or that their parents' had planned for them. Others, especially the community college students, report a specific catalyst for enrolling, including being unemployed, wanting to get their education completed before having children, or wanting to better support and improve the lives of the children they already have. Many of these students say they want their college education to help them get a job so they can have more financial security for themselves and their families, and have a better lifestyle overall.

> "Nowadays, you can't do anything without…without going to school. Not even with your high school diploma you can't get a good job." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "Security in the job, security in money, and security in benefits that comes from the job." – *Technical college student, Seattle*
>
> "It seems like a lot of jobs require a college degree, so that's part of the reason I went to college." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "To be able to make enough money to live the way you want to and love the job that you do." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*
>
> "I don't think I could have gotten anywhere with just my high school education." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"It was like a given to me, it wasn't anything to think about. It was just something that was supposed to happen. It wasn't like, 'Should I go to college or shouldn't I?' It was, 'You are going to college.'" – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I just feel you have to go to college if you want a high-paying job or you want to succeed… college is getting into another stage of your life that you need to be successful." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I thought to myself that I will do it now so that my children will always want to do it and for debt and things like that. Maybe I can help them go through it so they won't be in as much debt as I was or am in now." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"I wanted to be better than my dad… You don't want to come home every day and be tired. Use your mind, go to school." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"A good job. Because there is a job that you do just to pay the bills and there is the other job that you just do out of happiness and I guess just getting a good job that you like to do, whatever you like to do." – *Community college student, Seattle*

- **Self-improvement and growth:** The second primary goal students report is to become more well-rounded by the learning and growing experiences that college offers. Many say they are going to college to better themselves in a more holistic way that goes beyond the type of job for which they will be qualified. For many, this encompasses an academic growth that includes knowing more about the world and society. For some, this also includes social experiences and interactions that help them grow and mature. This is an especially strong goal for the four-year university students in our discussions, who say they want their college experience to provide them with opportunities for self-exploration, fun, and to learn more about the world, and to be agents of good and change in society.

"I think just going to school kind of brings a different perspective in what is possible and how much your life can change if you continue to study and get a Master's Degree and get a Ph.D. or get a whatever." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I want to get knowledge. I want a career, but I want to know about things…so when my kids ask me about stuff, I know and I can help them and just know about all the things that the society has to offer and the world has to offer." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I think that it should prepare people to be human beings." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Learn something that you will enjoy for the rest of your life to move forward later…" – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"A better understanding of what I want to do with my life. I kind of hope that I will get a better idea as college goes and hopefully before it ends." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"To apply yourself to achieve the highest level of understanding of your subject matter so you can go out and better yourself." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Being open to new experiences. Always being a scholar and also always teaching yourself." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"Just to better yourself and master it..." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"And I think college changes people, too. It makes you find what you want to do. It makes you explore." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"Taking time to mature." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"Meeting different types of people, learning more than one thing." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

When students shift their perspective from the personal to a broader discussion of what the overall goals of higher education in general should be, they independently list goals similar to their own personal reasons for attending college—to give students the knowledge and tools they need to be prepared for a line of work that they can find satisfying and to help students learn about the world more broadly and expand their horizons. When they consider which of these two goals should be more important for higher education, the students see merit in both because, they say, too much focus on preparation for a specific career can limit one's intellectual development and ability to switch career paths, but focusing only on academic development without the goal of career preparation can leave one with limited options after graduation as well. Cost also plays into goals of higher education, as some note that a goal should be to keep the cost low and affordable so that students do not come out with high debt. Others feel a goal should be to make sure students graduate in the stated timeframe of two to four years.

"It's like you should learn a little bit about something else because the whole world doesn't revolve around just the career that you want to do." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"You never know what life is going to hand you. You never know, you might have to change. I didn't think I would have this much trouble, but I think you should have the skills to say, 'Oh this isn't working and so I am going to do something else. I think you should be a more rounded person." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"A college or educational institution should have a goal to challenge the mind to think, to make people think in a broader way...At least if I finish, I will know that I have the tools to think more and so I can apply what I am learning to any field that I go into. I think that should be a goal." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I think the broader base would be better because then you would have more options as a person." – *Community college student, Seattle*

The students in the Seattle groups also agree, when prompted, that the broader goal of higher education in helping to "level the playing field" in society is a generally good goal, but this is not a goal that all of the students strongly espouse. They say the opportunity to attend college should be open to all, but some push back and say handing out a free opportunity to attend college seems unfair and there is a likelihood many would waste this opportunity. Going to college, they say, is a mixture of being provided opportunities, but also taking responsibility, ownership, and putting in some of one's own resources and hard work.

"My personal opinion is that everyone should have an opportunity at higher education and that it should be used to create independent thinking and just helping society in general." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Yeah, I think it should level the playing field for everyone, not just for the wealthy percentile that gets to go to college." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"If you just mean handing it to people, no, I don't think that should happen at all because I had to work really hard. I am 30 you know. I haven't been in school since I graduated high school and I made it so that I could go. I didn't just sit back and have somebody hand it to me and I worked hard. Why should you just have it handed to you though so you can throw it away?" – *Technical college student, Seattle*

When these students consider whether creating an educated citizenry should be a goal for higher education, the students agree that our country needs an educated citizenry, but most believe this is more the role of K-12 schools, than for colleges or universities. As one four-year student in Philadelphia stated, "I think maybe through high school you had History and English and I think you already have a decent educational base and I think college should be more of a specialized path of what you want to do with your life."

Helping Students Meet Their Goals

These students are somewhat mixed on whether their respective colleges are giving them what they want and need to help them achieve success, but students' overall assessments are more positive than negative. They generally feel that their schools offer them what they need, however, there is also strong acknowledgement that getting help from their school is not always provided up-front and it is often something they have to ask for or make a specific effort to obtain.

"I believe it does. Ultimately, they are giving you the tools and you have to do something with it." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I guess I get the help I need. And if I don't, then I have to go get it." — *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"There is plenty of assistance and stuff; you just have to go look for it." —*Independent adult, community college, Seattle*

"You just have to motivate yourself… You don't really rely on anyone else to like help you unless you like try to seek out that help then it is there, but you just have to be motivated yourself." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"Everything is here; you just have to apply yourself." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Some students report feeling mild uncertainty about whether they are getting what they need—including the education they need — from their college to reach their goals, as this is something they feel they will have a better sense of once they graduate, try to get a job, and start working. This feeling is especially strong among the four-year university students in our Philadelphia and Millersville discussions.

"Well, I won't really know until the end. My reward is getting a good job and accepted into the next program that I want to get to. So that's the only way I will know I am getting a good education as far as being able to apply it." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I don't think you will be able to tell until you are actually doing the job you are preparing for. I mean I understand you have debits and credits and whatnot, but I have never applied anything in an accounting job. I don't know what is important and used every day, and what is theory." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"By the end of your college experience, if you have learned and you have grown and you feel like you are prepared to go into whatever field it is you want to do." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

The technical college students in our Seattle discussion stand apart from the other students on this topic. Many feel fairly confident that their school is providing them the education they need to achieve success as a student and in their chosen career field.

"I went to a different [community] college before. I feel like this is more hands-on, it's face to face, and it's in your face. It's fast paced and they are just training you for the real world." –*Technical college student, Seattle*

"I am kind of in my ideal college experience. Everything goes back to my instructors and how willing they are to put forth a lending hand. You know they have a lot of experience; they want you to succeed; they push you to succeed." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

Obstacles to Student Success

Top obstacles

The top obstacles to success cited by students include tangible barriers of inadequate advising and guidance from the college and insufficient funding, as well as obstacles that are more intangible, including lack of time, balancing school, work, and family responsibilities, and lacking time management skills, study skills, and general self-discipline and motivation.

Advising and Guidance: Across the groups, students voice a strong desire for more well-informed and accessible guidance and advising to help them with their course selection, understanding requirements for graduation, choosing a major, and planning out the best overall academic and professional course.

The students report a diverse range of experiences with the current advising infrastructures at their schools. Some say they have no assigned advisors and are left to figure things out using a student handbook and websites – which can be outdated. This, they say, can leave them with many questions and has led to them taking courses they did not need or for which they were unprepared. Other students describe a system where they are required to visit an advisor and obtain sign-off to register for their courses. For some students, this has worked well enough on the first try, but more say that their assigned advisors are often overwhelmed with students, inaccessible, not terribly helpful, or are wholly uninformed. Many say they have yet to find an advisor that works for them, while those who have found something that works say they had to go to several different people or offices before they got what they needed. Across the groups, students feel advising offices are not accessible enough and attribute this, in part, to the high numbers of students or low numbers of staff.

> "When I was not sure which was going to be my major and I was trying to get some counselor to help me in health care and what were my choices so that I would be able to find a job or not -- it was almost impossible to get any feedback at all." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I would like more people to talk to if you have questions. Because I know getting in touch with my counselor is virtually impossible. So even if I wanted to change my major, it would be so hard because she is basically unreachable. And she is so busy all the time with everybody else and they need more people to help with how many students we have at the university. There are so many kids there. You can set up a ten-minute meeting or a 30-minute meeting. And then you are done… it doesn't matter if you have more to ask, you will have to come back another time." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "Those counselors don't do anything. You are taking classes that you don't even need to be taking. They definitely need better counselors." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I went last semester… to the counselor to do my classes and she said, 'Oh, you have a certain amount of credits, you can go yourself online.' But I am like, 'Okay, but I come here so you can help me.' 'Oh, well here is the handbook; you can look up the classes you need. Look at your transcripts and see what you need.' And I took a class that I didn't need just because it was on there." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"The advisors aren't really available much. Their office hours are they are in there like two hours. I have been like chasing my advisor down for the past week because I am in class or I get to his office and he is not in his office yet and I have a class in 15 minutes and so I can't wait. We need advisors who are going to be in their offices for a long period during the day instead of just two hours because it is hard to plan our schedules around their schedules when we need help." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I think that it would be really beneficial if there was a counselor… And then you could kind of tell me, 'Well, I want this job or else you would say this is what I like doing.' It could go either way. So you can tell them what you like doing and they can help you choose the job or else you can say, 'I want this job, what should I take?'" – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"When I was registered for the fall, I had a person and she was just like rushing with it and trying to just register me for whatever and she was doing what she thought was good and I am only taking 14 credits and then I went back to her again and she did the same thing and wouldn't have enough credits to be considered a sophomore even though I would be a sophomore. And so then I went to like a different group of counselors and I have a really good counselor now and she helped me out a lot and I am happy I went to her." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

While students see much room for strengthening the guidance and advising at their schools, there is also a sentiment across the groups that one can get the guidance and advising help needed, but that this often requires one to put in the time and effort to get it. Many students say quality guidance and a rich advisor-advisee relationship will not fall into one's lap. Instead, one may have to see several different people and try several approaches before they get the help they need and want.

"I think they are available; they are just limited. And you kind of have to know how to navigate in and around and through them." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"That's the type of thing that you have to look for yourself. Like it doesn't just pop out, you really have to ask for it." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I was able to do that at a four-year college that I went to, but if you don't know the ins or outs or have somebody walking you through the community college or online college, it's kind of like you are just a student and you just kind of have to fend for yourself." – *Community college student, Seattle*

Even though this attitude of expected self-reliance in the area of guidance may dampen students' initial calls for improvement in this area, once students delve into what they need from their school, there is a strong belief that improvement in this area would be very helpful in improving student success – whether it is more full-time academic advisors or from their current professors and instructors. Specifically, students say they need and want more help to understand the academic requirements and expectations they face, and more help plotting and executing their plan to meet their goals—which generally includes either graduation or transfer to a four-year college.

"If he is taking accounting, he might find an accounting teacher that he will click with and becomes his mentor." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"You should have the counselors and advisors know what they are talking about. You should go to advisors that are in the same field that you want to go into so they can tell you, 'Oh this is not important, but this is,' and help you set goals." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"The advisors, in my perception, don't necessarily know…like the registration questions and all the paperwork and stuff, I got that. It's like the actual work in the classrooms…the advisors are not knowledgeable enough about that so I can say, 'I have noticed in this class that I am really good at this and maybe I could do this.' But my instructors on the other hand, they would point out something that I am good at and they are like, 'Okay well you can actually utilize this in this career field when you have graduated.'" – *Community college student, Seattle*

Costs: Getting more monetary assistance to help cover the costs of going to school is another primary item students say they need to help them achieve success in college. Concerns about paying for tuition and covering other costs for attending school are especially strong and more immediate among the community and technical college students in Philadelphia and Seattle, and less of a concern among the four-year university students – although some mention concern around having to pay back loans once they graduate. Many of the community college and technical college students report facing semi-constant uncertainty over how they will put enough money together from one semester to the next and still have enough to personally make ends meet. They worry about whether they will get enough aid from the school or the government, and some full-time students worry if they will be able to borrow enough money for tuition and living expenses. Many report their personal finances are stressed to the max.

"I think the books are even getting more expensive. Every semester. And then when you go to get your money back for the books, they cost what $5 or $12." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Just money, because you have to have the money coming in, but you also need time because you are spending money to learn. You have to worry about that." –*Technical college student, Seattle*

"For me, it's definitely financial. You know me and my fiancée are both in school and you know working and having kids, I just didn't realize how hard it would be…I mean the school part is actually easier than I thought it would be, but the financial part is just…." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"What I don't understand about this country is that they want us to be better citizens and do better, but how come the tuition is so expensive? And it gets more expensive every year." –*Technical college student, Seattle*

Many students—across types of schools—also feel that the financial aid departments at their schools need to be more accessible and helpful. Many students report having to leave numerous messages and making multiple visits to their financial aid office before they have the information or assistance they need.

"I feel like at [my college] that certain areas are easy to get assistance in, but other areas are not, like financial aid and enrollment…Like financial aid has phone numbers that I think is only on for like two hours a day, so if you work or have a life outside of school, you can't go in or call them." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"I think you get the runaround from this place to that place and talk to this one and that one and that one. Try and call a financial aid officer; it's terrible." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I would go and ask a question and felt like…they would look at me like I am supposed to know. They are like real choppy. I will call for a question and then they will be sarcastic, like I am supposed to know." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

When asked specifically about their current tuition levels, most students say their college costs seem to be increasing, as well as student fees and textbook prices. Most students say they would love to see tuition decrease, but that this seems unrealistic because they perceive that demand is high and enrollments at their schools are increasing. Some students also say that lowering costs would no doubt be balanced by cuts at the school that could lower the quality of their own education. They reason that in many ways you get what you pay for, and in a time of rising prices, lower tuition or fees could mean fewer computer labs or lower pay for professors – all of which could result in lower-quality opportunities for them as students.

"You get what you pay for sometimes." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"I don't think it [tuition] could necessarily be lower, but just provide more assistance so that you can afford it whatever the cost is." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"You have to do more work, like look into scholarships because sometimes you can't pay for your books because the fee went up and so you have to get extra work and going to the career center and find out what kind of scholarships are available for you and then you have to write more essays to get those scholarships." – *Community college student, Seattle*

There is some diversity of opinion across the focus groups regarding student loans and debt. Some students, particularly four-year university students, say they have some low-level anxiety about the student loans they have taken out, but this is not top-of-mind for them because they do not currently have to make payments. They do acknowledge that when they have to start re-paying their loans further down the road, this will become a much larger concern.

"The balance of debt. It will kind of come to bite after college." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"When we are looking to pay it back. As of right now, you are applying for financial aid and everything is just being out there and paid for and it's not like it is coming out of our pockets to apply something to education, but when it's time to pay it back, then we are going to wish it wasn't." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"Yes, it will help you during college, because you don't have to work and stuff, but later on, it's just going to bring you down more." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

At the same time, some of the community college students report feeling pressure from those around them to not go to school and take on debt, in large part because of the current economy and high unemployment rates. Many of these students reason, however, that going to school is their best path to achieve financial security and in the long-run is the right course of action.

"Now, most of the high school kids that I know, they just go from high school to get a new job. They see that as more secure. You know I could have money now; I don't like getting into a bunch of debt." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"Is it really worth it? Going through all this school and everything you know? You get out of school… And then we are stuck with that debt already." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"Even my mom, she doesn't encourage it. She feels like you work and you are more secure than if you go to college and then you don't get a job and then you have just wasted all that time and all that money." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"When you get done with your program, are there going to be openings? Are you going to be able to utilize what you learned and not just have to pay back all these wonderful loans…?"
– *Community college student, Seattle*

Time and Balance: Time—another precious and finite resource for the students in our discussions—plays a key role in the success of most of the students and feeds into the funding obstacle as well. There is strong acknowledgment that being a student takes time, and many say it takes more time than they had originally imagined. Students explain that the time they have to spend in class and studying, as well as time dealing with the other logistics of going to school (financial aid, registration, etc.) is time they are not spending at work and earning money, or tending to their familial responsibilities, or dealing with any of their other responsibilities in life.

Across the groups, students say they constantly struggle with how to balance all of these responsibilities within an equation that restricts each day to only 24 hours. The load and types of responsibilities the students have to balance varies across the groups. For some of the four-year university students and those who are not parents, balance is more an issue of managing their social life, working, and being a student. For other students who are parents or also working full-time, balance includes juggling a 40-hour work week, tending to children, and trying to dedicate enough time to their school work to make the money they are spending on school worthwhile.

"Sometimes they mention a paper, a 20-page paper, when you work over 20 hours, time management is key and that causes stress and that causes overwhelming(ness)." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"There is a lot coming at you. And you have a lot of stuff going on at home and so it's always trying to find balance." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Sometimes I feel I am not trying as hard as maybe I could be. Maybe if I had more time, maybe I could…I do well, but I could do a lot better. I could probably do really well. So that's kind of just like annoying because I know like I could be doing so much better if I really had the time to sit and study and really try instead of just last minute and looking at stuff. " – *Community college student, Seattle*

"Also being a parent. You feel like you are not doing…you should be making them to their best and not you to your best anymore. So that's a struggle." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"It's tough sometimes. It's hard work. It's a lot of work in a short amount of time. You have lots of deadlines to meet. On any given day, there are tests or a quiz or a new paper you have due and getting that all in on time is a lot." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I am balancing a baby and work and school. It wasn't hard before I had the baby; but now I have the baby and so I have to do everything around him." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"The balance, balancing your classes and not being like a hermit and having a social life." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

The length of time that it takes to complete schooling can be a practical and psychological stumbling block for students. Some part-time students, and even full-time students, describe that key, required classes may only be offered once a year, and if they cannot take the course because of their part-time status or other conflicts, they may be stuck waiting another year to take the required course. They also say that the longer it takes to finish, the more chances there are for requirements for graduation to change, and for other things in life to come up and prevent them from finishing. The long road to finishing, with potential pay-offs far in the future, can also dampen one's motivation. This is much more common among the community college students than the four-year university students in our discussions.

Soft Skills: Across the groups, students say another large obstacle to success can be lacking a strong set of intangible skills, including time management, study skills, and general self-discipline. Maintaining one's study-discipline and motivation can be a constant challenge, students say, especially when facing other time-related barriers. Many say they had to learn how to manage their time and learn study habits upon starting their college coursework and most seem to have developed these skills on their own, through trial and error. A few say their College 101, orientation, or pre-orientation courses gave them useful tips for developing these skills, but this is not common among the students in our discussions.

"You've got to have that self-discipline because nobody is going to tell you, you have to do that on your own." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"That's what it takes to graduate: you need a good instructor to explain information, the material, and you need self-motivation to drive yourself when you don't want to do your work, or are you going to be lazy." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Good time management and study habits and being able to get outside help and have the motivation to focus." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"You have to be a little bit more self-sufficient… and have to be responsible for yourself. I mean nobody is looking at you if you don't do what you need to, it's on you; you are not going to pass the class." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I look at the syllabus, what is the textbook, what is the workload, what are the days, when is midterms and when is final, how can I cumulate this, how can I balance this out." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Making sure that you are following the syllabus and stuff on time, like as soon as you get it. Just being focused and being on top of or ahead of what you are expected to do." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"When the first semester started, I was thinking that I was going to fail everything. And so when I got into it, it really wasn't that hard. It gradually took you into the college stuff." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Other Obstacles

These students also discuss other stumbling blocks that are not as strong or as widespread as the top tier obstacles. These include overly stringent or complex general education requirements, large class sizes and over-enrollment, limited course offerings, the need for more high-quality and accessible tutoring, the need for more face-time with professors (which can also be tied to the top obstacle of poor guidance and advising), and the fast pace of teaching among technical college students.

General Education Requirements: For some students, especially four-year university students, the general education requirement courses they must fulfill can dampen their overall motivation and excitement, and can seem not worth their time or effort. Many students point to one or two courses they had to take to fulfill a general education requirement that were uninteresting, did not seem applicable to their major or area of interest, or were unnecessarily difficult. Some complain they have to spend a lot of time and energy on such courses, and many say they feel they have to get through too many of the general education courses before they can begin studying things they really want to study.

> "I don't think the electives are necessary. I would rather have all service classes, all the classes I need, and not waste my time with electives. Last semester I took Art and I failed it and that's on my transcripts." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I was a nursing major and they made us take an economics class and I was like, 'What does this have to do with nursing?' I mean, now I understand the market much better, but I mean for my career path, I don't really understand like why I needed to take that, but I have to."
> – *Community college student, Seattle*
>
> "I feel like it takes a long time to get to the end. A lot of prerequisites, a lot of classes I don't feel are necessary to what I want to go to school for. It's just a lot of jumping through hoops to get there." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*
>
> "I would probably just get rid of the electives [general education requirements] all together because I feel like I am there to learn what I want to be able to do and it's not really giving me anything new." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I only feel unsure about it sometimes because of some of my less liked and important classes, because what's the purpose of having a class I am never going to apply my life to it?" – *Four-year university student, Millersville*
>
> "None of them really appeal to me as much as…like I found one that kind of relates to my major and that would appeal to me more than just like taking some random class." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I would cut out some of the Gen Eds because a lot of them are annoying, like music. I am a social work major and I really don't think I need music because it's kind of wasting my time when I can take something that is going to help me for what I need. Cut out some of the extra stuff that are not really important and have everything so we can get our classes when we need our classes." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

At the same time, however, some students acknowledge that having some general education requirements can help them become more well-rounded and that it is sometimes through these required courses that one can explore a whole new, exciting topic that they never would have studied, which can help them pick a major. Ultimately, these students call for having more latitude to select general education requirements that relate to their major or other areas of interest.

> "Some of them are pointless, but I think they are a good idea because they help you expand on your knowledge and know what else is out there as a major because I think pretty much people change their majors because of the Gen Eds because they become interested in something else." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"Maybe you will find that you are actually interested in that." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I think we do need them all in some way because to some people each requirement can go hand-in-hand with their major. Like for the Atmosphere [course], like someone could go in like that field and they might actually enjoy that class." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Large Class Sizes: Some of the students, especially those enrolled in four-year universities, also list large class sizes as problematic. They say the large class sizes they face can make it harder to ask questions and generally mean they will have a less interactive professor and learning environment. This is less of a concern for the community college and technical college students in our discussions.

"Sometimes when you are in a big class, you feel kind of lost in a sea of faces, and if everybody else seems to be getting what's going on and you are not, you are less likely to ask for that help because everybody else is getting it." -- *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Basically you wouldn't even need tutoring if you have the one-on-one interaction with the professor." – *Community college student, Seattle*

In a related vein, some students also complain about over-enrollment at their schools. This was more common in our Millersville group and students in community colleges. Some of these students perceive that the number of students attending their school is increasing, and as this happens the current students get stuck with larger classes, less financial aid, and more strain on the support structures, including advisors, tutors, computer labs and other equipment.

"Then you have larger classes. And then you still have the same amount of instructors." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"They are trying to attract more people to the campus when I don't think the campus can really take anymore people because it is already a problem getting housing on campus and the class sizes and everything. So I think attracting more people is really going to harm the learning. If they want to build things, they need to build more classrooms so we have more professors instead of building bigger student memorial centers and all that stuff." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

Limited Course Offerings: Limited course offerings are another item that students raise as standing in their way and that they would like to see addressed. Many say not being able to enroll in the courses they need (or want) when they need to take them can set them behind in their course of study and limits their ability to take courses that could be truly beneficial. Some students who see increasing enrollments at their schools say they also recognize this means more limited course offerings, as course sizes are often capped. Additionally, lack of guidance in how to navigate course offerings, some say, can make this an even bigger obstacle.

More Face-Time with Professors: Some students cite not being able to access their professors adequately or their professors being too stretched for time as a barrier. Students attribute this to a combination of different things, including: professors having too much material to cover; professors not having enough control over the way their courses are structured, the syllabus, or the selection of the textbooks; and class sizes that are too large. We also hear a desire for teachers to employ different kinds of teaching techniques in the classroom, rather than sticking with just one way of teaching.

"Ideally, everyone would have their own personal professor." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"[I want] one-on-one academic help, and not necessarily in the classroom. I mean some teachers offer it, but then a lot of them will be like 'go get a tutor' when you don't want to work with a tutor; you want to work with that teacher because what they are teaching is what is going to be on their test and the tutors can't really accomplish that." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"[I need] teachers who are accessible, meaning like available when you need them and will actually respond to you." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I think if you go see them during office times, then they will help you more, but if you try to ask them in class, they are on a schedule and so they are just trying push through everything." –*African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"I feel also that there is a combination. When you are working full-time and you need to take extra time to go and talk with the teacher when his hours doesn't match with your hours and then it's like what do I do now. And when you try to speak in the break during the class, usually my experience is teachers are not that open." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"The way they teach you, just to teach it a certain way. I don't know; I feel like sometimes teachers teach the way that they understand instead of how others understand it." – *Community college student, Seattle*

Tutoring: We also hear some students say that higher-quality and more accessible tutoring would be important in helping them achieve success. Many students say tutoring is available at their school, but that they find the tutoring sessions to be over-crowded or that the person is not well-versed in what they need help with. Providing more one-on-one tutoring and more times where tutoring would be available can be helpful for students.

"Everybody is trying to get tutoring and you have to find that one tutor that really works with you." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I would like a personal tutor for each person." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"I had a problem with one of my teachers, and he was like, 'Well you should have never took this class. You should be in a lower one.' I am well like, 'This is the one I need to be in.' 'Well I can't help you; go to a tutor.' And because I go to different campuses too, and in that campus, they don't have that tutor. I have to travel to another campus to have a tutor. And I was trying to explain that and he didn't understand. 'Withdraw the class, get another class.' 'I can't; it's too late into the semester.'" – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Sometimes English is their second language [the tutors'] and you just trying to understand them. When you go to tutoring, you want to…You want to understand them. I mean you are already confused as it is." – *Community college student, Seattle*

Fast Pace: Some technical college students say that the fast pace of the teaching and large amount of material they have to cover in every class can be a barrier. This is reported particularly by those studying information technology or computer-related fields. These students say keeping up with the fast pace is a constant struggle

and they worry or have heard that if you fall behind in grasping the concepts or completing the assignments, you cannot easily catch-up. One student relayed, "In one quarter, we had to learn three different languages in a quarter and a lot of people couldn't deal with that. And like this quarter we are doing C Sharp and SQL, so people are just…I don't know. I think it intimidates them, especially females, and they just leave."

Classroom Experiences

The Role of Faculty

Across the groups, students of all types recognize that their faculty—professors and instructors—are a central component of their learning and play an important role in their success in college.

Most students report positive interactions and relationships with their professors and instructors. They tend to say they are dedicated and well-qualified. Some community college students in our discussions even say their professors have said that they could teach at "higher-caliber" schools, but they chose their current school because they are dedicated to helping community college or technical college students.

> "The teachers and just the way they interact with their students. They want you to learn. You know they want you to." – *Community college student, Seattle*
>
> "I am sure that this teacher has a degree where they could teach at any college they want to. But why are they here teaching us? And I always ask myself that. I have teachers that graduated from Columbia, from University of Pennsylvania. And I asked them why are you here at CCP and they say those kids have everything at those bigger colleges." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*
>
> "I had this one teacher that…went to school at like Harvard and she taught somewhere else and she said she hated it there and she wanted to be like in a community college. She was the smartest lady I have ever known." – *Community college student, Seattle*

Most of the students in our discussions feel their professors are a positive force, working on their behalf under the broadly shared goal of student success. It is a mixed bag, however, when it comes to how much different professors contribute to student success. The students say some professors and instructors go out of their way to make sure students are engaged and understand the material, while others say some professors do not go out of their way to help but can be helpful when asked. Few students report completely negative relationships with their professors or having professors who were barriers to their success.

> "I am kind of in my ideal college experience. Like I said, everything goes back to my instructors and how willing they are to put forth a lending hand. You know they have a lot of experience; they want you to succeed; they push you to succeed." – *Technical college student, Seattle*
>
> "It's a mix. Like some of my professors really help and they are really supportive and they are good at teaching what they are supposed to teach." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "You have to ask for help when you get help…I feel like it's kind of like meeting them halfway. Personally, my professors they tell me that they are there and their office hours and if you need help, come get it. But eventually, you are the one who wants to go to them." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*
>
> "I think my professors are engaged in my learning." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"Sometimes it depends on the class size, but if there is a professor there that just runs through the material as fast as they can, then it just gets done and that's it. [They say] 'if you want help, come see me in my office.' But then there are other professors that take the extra step and make sure every person understands it." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"There is one teacher that…really passionate and willing to help you and trying to make sure you understand individually, even going around the class and the personality and optimistic, and you have another teacher who is just like…he is not a happy type and he doesn't try to sit down and make you understand even when you have a bad test. It just shows you that it is bad, but he doesn't want to sit down and correct and help you or even just give you the paper to take with you and look at what you did wrong." – *Community college student, Seattle*

When students consider what makes a "good" professor or instructor who contributes to their success as a student, they list a mixture of tangible and intangible characteristics, including:

- Exhibiting enthusiasm and passion in teaching and helping students,
- Practicing an interactive teaching style,
- Being schooled in pedagogy, as well as being an expert on the subject matter; this is seen as especially helpful because it can help professors modify their teaching for students with different learning styles,
- Including lectures, class discussions, and assignments that emphasize the relevance of the course material and coursework, including weaving in other related topics that bring the subject matter to life and make the material directly applicable to their course of study,
- Building in extra time in class periods to answer questions and not rushing through material,
- Being prepared for the day's teaching and the course overall,
- Setting and communicating clear expectations to students from the beginning of the course, and
- Being accessible to students, including responding to phone calls and emails in a timely manner, and having sufficient office hours.

"They will encourage you to take part in the projects and stuff like that. This instructor that I have, he brings real world examples to teach the book and so that shows that he has personal interest in seeing us succeed." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"I like teachers that act like they are excited and they enjoy teaching." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Just energetic and has everybody talking, and like I can't wait to go to my classes; it's just fun." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"I love thorough teachers; they explain everything and so I don't have to ask many questions if I don't need to because everything is in the syllabus. I like a teacher who is thorough and tells you exactly what they expect." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"When they are willing to actually go a distance to teach you and meet with you after class and sit there one-on-one and work it out with you." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"All of my professors, they try to reach out to you, especially my math teacher. She is always trying to get everybody extra help. She is always emailing everybody." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I would like to see more instructors with experience in the industry, you know firsthand knowledge, access to firsthand knowledge." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

In a related vein, when students consider what characteristics make a course particularly useful in contributing to their college success, they name a mixture of characteristics that are interwoven with the characteristics of a good professor. Students say a class is particularly useful when:

- The course material and assignments are applicable to their goals and interests,
- The course is rigorous and gives them a thorough understanding of the topic,
- The course teaches them needed skills and skills that will be used on a weekly basis,
- It easily relates to other classes or builds on what they have learned in earlier courses,
- It helps direct their interests, or takes them down an academic path they may not have gone down otherwise, and
- It is taught in an interactive style.

"I think the most useful course I took was the most useful because I was able to relate it to my other classes and use the skills I learned in that course for other classes and other aspects of my life." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"I took English 201 and I kind of feel like I skated, but I think for a lot of people in the classroom, it did a good job of addressing a lot of needs that people have for grammatical awareness and the ability to break down a certain text." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"The subjects that I am taking for what I am doing, meds is like a basic education. It's the foundation." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"Just the hands-on. Instead of just sitting there reading the book and looking at it and off you go, we were interactive with the teacher." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

Part-Time/Adjunct Faculty

Very few students in our discussions independently bring up the issue of whether their faculty members are employed on a full-time or part-time/adjunct basis. Even when the issue is brought up for discussion in the focus groups, many students say they are unaware of the employment status of their professors. Those who think they know the status, say they are aware either because that professor explicitly told them, he or she teaches only evening classes, or because the professor is less accessible during traditional hours. There is little to no awareness that part-time/adjunct faculty members may make the rest of their living by also teaching part-time

at other institutions, which leads to the perception of "part-time" faculty members often as holding non-teaching jobs during the day-time.

Most students generally say they do not see much difference in the quality of the professor's teaching based on whether they are employed full-time or part-time by the school, especially since they are unaware of which professors fall into which category.

> "I know because I ask. I can't tell; there was not a difference to me." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*
>
> "They share at the beginning of class, or at the beginning of the quarter, that, 'I am available these days and these times.' Or they let you know that they have other commitments or other jobs." – *Community college student, Seattle*

Some students recognize and bring up that they enjoy some of their part-time/adjunct faculty members because of their ability to bring in a more work-oriented perspective to their studies. This is especially strong among technical college students, those studying specific fields such as information technology, business, health sciences, sports therapy, or art, because, students say, teachers who work in the field can help them learn the most-up-to date techniques and approaches.

> "In that aspect it helps because in their jobs, they are learning new things every day and so it helps in the classroom." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "A lot of our teachers are either athletic trainers like at Temple or like other schools and so it's like easier for us to like learn because they are already doing this and like they are in the field and they bring their experiences to us…" – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*
>
> "Let's say that if you teach at night an accounting course and you are working in that field during the day, you can bring like that professional experience into the classroom." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

At the same time, the primary difference students perceive between full-time and part-time/adjunct faculty is in the part-time professor's level of availability and accessibility. Many students tend to find some of their part-time/adjunct faculty to be less accessible mostly because they have another job, are not immediately reachable via phone call or e-mail, and are not on campus and holding office hours as much as other faculty.

This has varying degrees of seriousness for the students in our discussions. For some students, the more limited availability of some part-time/adjunct faculty simply means that their professor is slower to respond to the emails or voicemails or that their professors seem more rushed in their arrival to class and can take longer to set up and begin the class.

For others, the implications are slightly deeper. They imagine some of their part-time/adjunct professors may not have as much time to plan the course, prepare for daily teaching, review student assignments, and respond in-depth to student questions. A few students point out that, compared to a full-time professor who may teach the same course over and over again, part-time/adjunct professors may not have mastered how to most effectively teach the subject matter to students. A few students also perceive that part-time/adjunct professors, compared to full-time professors, may not be as much a part of the academic department and this may make them less familiar with the courses of the department or the course sequences or requirements within a major of study. This, a few say, could mean that the professor is less able to plan and teach their course in a way that

fits into the rest of the academic program and means they are less able to advise students about which courses to take next. As mentioned previously, these are not top-of-mind issues for most students, but when the topic is explored they can see the problems discussed above.

"If you write an email, it's going to take them a little bit longer because maybe they are not there that day; maybe they are somewhere else, like at their job. So you kind of get a sense at the beginning of the quarter. Like this is a person who will probably be able to get a hold of whenever you need to or you know during normal business hours they will email you back." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I feel like all my teachers have different jobs because one of my teachers is a writer for a magazine… So I feel like the classes I take are kind of their part-time job and so it's not like they get into it and stuff like that." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"A part-time [professor] is dealing with two different things – teaching at school and working a job. You know they are juggling two things at one time. A full-time teacher focuses on school you know, focuses on instructing a class." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"The part-time, it's like they are always in a rush to go somewhere else." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"Full-time teachers generally teach the same class multiple quarters in a row and so they have a better set-up, a system, and they already know the timeframe that works and they learn from their previous quarters about what works and what doesn't and so they have generally a better layout for the class." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"I think full-time professors know more about the college where a part-time professor doesn't… like my full-time professors, they are like okay they have or know math labs or tutoring or whatever it is, I don't know what it is, and they will hand you out a little flyer about where to go, where maybe a part-time wouldn't know that." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I would rather have full-time professors because I feel like they are more focused on what we are doing. Because I hate handing in a paper and then not getting it back until the end of the semester. I want to know what my grade is." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

In many of the groups, we also presented students with statistics about the increasing number of part-time/adjunct faculty: that 70 percent of faculty at community colleges are part-time; and that two out of every three new hires in a community college is either part-time or on a contract, meaning they are not permanent or tenured. For most in our discussions, this is new information of which the students were not previously aware. Reactions to this information are mixed across the groups. Some of the students shrug, and say that they do not see any problems with having a high proportion, or an increasing proportion of part-time/adjunct faculty. Other students, particularly some of the students in Seattle, have more a negative reaction to the statistics. These students say this is a problematic trend because they could see this eventually inhibiting the quality of the educational programs offered. They recognize that if more and more faculty become part-time or adjuncts, faculty could be even less available to students. Also, some students independently offer that part-time/adjunct faculty may not get benefits and or be paid less, which may make high-quality professors more likely to leave or look for work elsewhere. All of these things, the students acknowledge, can weaken the quality of the educational experience for students. This is also frustrating, some say, given the high price they pay for their education.

"I would have thought that it would be almost the opposite -- the 70% would be the full-time and that they just hire part-timers like to fill in the gaps." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"The more part-time jobs, the closer this school gets to like a community college level. So that would take away from having a university and this type of experience." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"There would be more problems with office hours and availability if you need extra help with something in class. I mean you have it now with full-time professors, so part-time is just going to be worse.

And then it could be competitive to try to get into office hours because if they were there for like that hour or two once a week, then everybody is going to be coming, so they are not going to have really a lot of time to like talk to you about what's going on or whatever questions you need to ask." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"I think it's very sad. Because they don't have that…they are not going to have that commitment to the school if they don't feel like they are going to be there in ten years you know. If they feel like they are going to be there in ten years, they are going to care more and they are going to have more comfort." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"You've got to pay them well and I guess you have to treat them well. They have to be happy in the environment that they are in." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"If you pay the teachers an adequate, livable wage, they would probably be more full-time ones there. They would actually be more passionate about their work and that would translate into more achieving, successful students and stuff. But with this right here, it's kind of scary; I mean it saddens me to know that 70% of faculty is part-time. That pisses me off to be honest." – *Community college student, Seattle*

Assessment & Feedback from Professors

Nearly all of the students in the focus groups report that they are assessed in their courses—through exams or more subjective assignments such as papers or essays—and that these are the mechanisms from which they obtain feedback from their professors. Some students report they are receiving sufficient feedback from these assessments, but most say that they would welcome more feedback, especially more in-depth feedback. It appears that feedback is more common on written essays, rather than on actual tests.

Similar to the students' attitudes about guidance and advising help, many students acknowledge that they can obtain more in-depth feedback if they seek it out, such as meeting with a professor or going to their office hours. Some say they try to do this, but that it is also a matter of how many hours one has in a day.

"Because a teacher will tell you what they expect if you ask them, but a lot of times you are afraid to." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"That's your responsibility. If you have a question from your test or a question on your essay, then that's your responsibility to take that and go to your professor or your teacher. They shouldn't have to say, 'Oh you did really bad on this essay and you should try to work on this or that.' You should want to take the initiative." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"Not unless you go to them during their office hours or whatever. But they are not just going to give it [assessment/feedback] to you." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"For my English papers we have conferences with the teacher after we have the paper and we sit down and we talk to him. And he tells us what he thinks about the paper and what we could do better and how he sees the things we have done similarly in other papers and how we have progressed and how we fixed our other problems. That helps to see like consciously how you are writing." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

Online Classes

Many of the students in our discussions see college courses that are solely or almost entirely taught online to be more of a negative than a positive. The biggest drawbacks to online classes, students say, is the lack of interaction with the professor or other students and the lack of opportunities to get the help they need and get their questions answered in order to master a subject, or complete an assignment. Some students describe online courses where they had great difficulty getting their questions answered, or ones where the professor was actually in another country the whole time and seemingly inaccessible. It is also easier, students complain, to fall behind in online courses because much of them are self-directed. Many express they feel like they have to teach themselves the material and that is especially frustrating for a course they have to pay for. All in all, many students feel they do not get their full money's worth out of an online course.

"When you are in class and you talk to an instructor or she is instructing the class or giving you information if you have a question or you need more information, you can ask. Online, you have to email or you know ask questions and maybe get an answer a week later or a few days later or hours later when you need the answer right then." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"You are basically teaching yourself. They tell you which chapters to read and then they give you notes, like a paragraph of notes, but you have to basically teach yourself." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"I am taking mostly online classes and I find that even though our online school is set up a certain way for the teachers to do it, sometimes they have their own way of doing things and you can't really go like 'okay how are you doing this because I don't understand?' Unless you go to the school and find them, which obviously the whole point of taking online is so you don't have to go to the school, so that's a little difficult." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"You get no personal time, like face to face with the professor. And you feel like if you are paying for classes, you should go to class and learn what they have to teach you there." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

"Also, it's like the communication thing. If you want to ask your instructor something, you are there and you can ask if you have an issue, they are right there, whereas online, it's convenient for you time wise when you need to, but when you need something, it's not as convenient." – *Independent adult, community college student, Seattle*

"It is, but it takes a lot away from…I mean I have taken a lot of online classes and in-person classes, and it's a lot harder to grasp subjects when you are struggling by yourself." – *Technical college student, Seattle*

"I didn't learn as much. I studied what I had to study; I took the test when I had to take the test; I turned in what I needed to turn in. And if I had questions, I could email, but it wasn't a quick response. I am more face-to-face, so I feel like I just did what had to be done and checked the box and got the grade." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"It was not a class that I would ever take again or recommend for anybody to take. Because if you don't manage your time right or you are not like pushed to get things done, you are just going to push that off. You might even forget about it." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"If you need the help, you know there is someone there, but if you are online, who do you ask? And there is a relationship with your professor that you wouldn't get online." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"That's the thing about it, like you can go anywhere and do an online course, but you are not really getting your moneys worth. You are getting your tuition paid for nothing." – Four-year university student, Millersville "It was not a class that I would ever take again or recommend for anybody to take. Because if you don't manage your time right or you are not like pushed to get things done, you are just going to push that off. You might even forget about it." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

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Some students describe successful experiences with online coursework. These are usually courses that were not a core subject, or part of their major, but courses students describe as less-important courses for them, or ones they had to take to fulfill a general education requirement. Some students also report that online courses that give plenty of feedback and constant assessment feel more worthwhile and are easier to complete, as compared to those with fewer assessments built in or ones where professor feedback was limited. These students are not anti-online courses, as some mention success with courses that have a mixed approach – some online, some in-person; the hesitancy is with completely online courses. Courses that are a true mix of in-person learning and interaction and online learning, can be useful and interesting.

Many students also acknowledge other positive aspects of online courses, including that the self-directed format of online classes and not having to physically show up at an actual classroom lend a level of flexibility and convenience that allows them to take courses that otherwise would not fit into their work, family, and school schedules. Some students say they have to take many of their classes online because of their work schedules and that they could not make progress on their degrees if they were not able to take online courses. Yet, even for many of students who acknowledge these positives, online courses are seen as a necessary evil. Instead, they often would rather take in-person classes.

"I have another online class where it is great. I can email her anytime and always get a response back. So it kind of depends on the teacher. But the online experience overall is very convenient because I work over 30 hours a week, so most of the time it is convenient." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"Even online courses that you can take, I feel like they are easier because, like you said, you work at your own pace." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"It is more convenient when you take it online. I don't have to take my son out the house each time I have a class to somebody different to watch him." – *African-American/Latino community college student, Philadelphia*

"If you know how to manage your time, then I guess it's good for you because then you can choose when you want to do your assignments and stuff." – *Four-year university student, Millersville*

"If it's one of those courses that some people have stated that you know you just want to knock it out." – *Community college student, Seattle*

"I feel like it depends on the class. Like the class I took, I think it was better online because I know a lot of people who tried taking it in person and the teacher actually being there kind of worked against the class." – *Four-year university student, Philadelphia*

Looking Forward: Remedying Student Obstacles

As these college students consider what could be done, either by their college or by others, to help them better deal with the obstacles to their success or at least make their paths easier, the two most common themes are:

- **Getting more help to pay for their education**, either through grants or scholarships, or other forms of aid. In a related vein, students say that their interactions with the financial aid offices need to be made easier and accessibility should be improved.

- **More informative and accessible guidance and advising.** This is something called for by all types of students, including four-year, community, and technical college students.

On a second tier are the following remedies that many students across the groups say would be helpful.

- **Refining general education requirements** to give students more flexibility to choose general education courses that are in-line with their interests and applicable to their major fields of study. This can also include more guidance to help find and select courses that fit these criteria.

- **Having faculty more accessible** for student questions and assistance. There is some recognition that employing more full-time faculty could improve accessibility.

- **Smaller class sizes,** which is called for more strongly among students at four-year universities. There is recognition that smaller class sizes will improve faculty accessibility.

- **Having more course offerings** to help students finish in the appropriate number of years for the degree, and to help them fit the classes they need into their schedules.

- **Normalizing and encouraging students seeking help,** including going to tutoring, attending professor office hours, and asking for more in-depth feedback from professors. The students in our discussions know this is available, but they also feel it can be helpful for the college culture to promote more professor-student interactions, assistance, and feedback as the norm, rather than something students only do when they need extra help.

- **More integrated career counseling:** Most students say that their school has a career center, and many have yet to visit it. Students express that better integrating career counseling and the career development office into their academic advising and major program of study would be highly beneficial and welcomed to help them better plan their coursework and help them form and meet their career goals.

- **Offering pre-orientation programs to more students, or strengthening orientation programs:** Students who attended a summer pre-orientation program, or a program specifically targeted for a certain group of students such as for Latino students, report that these were helpful in teaching them study skills, time management skills, setting their expectations for coursework, developing supportive peer and mentor relationships, and getting acquainted with the college campus and workings.

- **Improved career-specific equipment or opportunities:** Four-year university students in specific trade-oriented majors—like art or sports therapy—as well as technical college students, say they would benefit from more trade-specific equipment and career experiences available.

Table 2: Detailed Composition of Focus Group Participants

	Philadelphia		Seattle			Millersville
	Latino/AA Urban CC students	Urban 4-year university students	Urban CC students, Dev. Ed	Suburban Tech. clg. students	Indpt, working CC students	4-year regional university students
Total	10	10	10	10	8	10
Gender						
Male	4	4	5	5	4	3
Female	6	6	5	5	4	7
Age						
18-21	1	8	1	--	3	10
22-25	2	1	5	4	2	--
26-29	5	1	3	2	1	--
30+	2	--	1	4	2	--
Race						
White	--	7	4	2	4	3
Afr. Am.	5	1	2	2	1	4
Latino	5	1	--	2	--	2
Asian	--	1	2	1	2	--
Other	--	--	2	1	1	1
Have children at home	7	1	1	5	2	--