

Smart Investment Public Opinion Survey

October 1998

Highlights & Key Findings

Background

A total of 1,190 adult Washington residents were interviewed by telephone from July 7 through August 9, 1998, to determine their familiarity with and attitudes toward the state's 32 community and technical colleges. To ensure that the survey sample accurately reflects the population distribution and demographic characteristics of the state's adult population, 170 people were interviewed in each of seven geographic regions.

Conducted by Market Research Services of Redmond for the colleges' Smart Investment marketing and public relations committee, the survey measures public opinion regarding the overall quality of college programs, the adequacy of state funding, support for possible tuition increases, satisfaction with information received from the colleges and other issues. Results are also being compared with the findings of a similar survey conducted in 1994 and, where applicable, with the 1990 survey which formed the basis for the system's initial Smart Investment campaign.

The overall sample size of 1,190 yields a statewide reliability of plus-or-minus 2.9 percent with a 95 percent confidence level. This means the results have a 95 percent chance of coming within 2.9 percent of the results that would have been achieved if all Washington state residents had been surveyed. The regional sample size of 170 yields a reliability of plus-or-minus 7.5 percent with a 95 percent confidence level for each of the geographic regions.

Overview

Washington residents give the community and technical colleges high ratings for quality, importance and relevance. They place the highest value on job training and want two-year colleges to be both affordable and accessible. The colleges are recognized for their essential roles in economic development and addressing social concerns. In fact, all of the areas addressed by the colleges are important to a sizeable majority of residents.

Along with the good news, the survey points out some vital areas where improvements are needed to meet the public's expectations. Respondents were asked to rate the importance of key educational, economic and social issues and then to indicate how effective the colleges are in the various areas. The resulting "gap analysis" shows that people perceive the colleges are doing better on job skills training and retraining unemployed workers than in 1994, but performance in both areas still lags importance by several points. There are also gaps in the ratings for affordability and reducing illiteracy. Technology is also an area of concern, with only half agreeing that students have access to the latest technology and two-year college students possess essential computer skills.

Among the key findings:

- **People who know the two-year colleges love them.** Almost three out of four Washington residents are familiar with community and technical colleges, and these people give the colleges high ratings for quality. In the 1998 survey, 73 percent of respondents said they were familiar with the colleges. These numbers are essentially identical to both 1990 and 1994, when 71 percent said they were familiar with the colleges.

When asked to rate the overall quality of education, 63 percent of people familiar with the colleges said their quality is above average. This is a significant increase over 1994, when 56 percent said quality was above average. Comparable information isn't available from the 1990 survey.

Only 35 percent of those unfamiliar with the colleges (27 percent of all respondents) rate overall quality as above average.

- **Washington residents expect two-year colleges to deliver job skills training.** Helping students learn job skills was rated as the most important of 13 educational, economic and social issues addressed by two-year colleges. The survey also highlighted public concerns about keeping programs up to date and strengthening the quality of job training efforts.
- **People are concerned about whether the colleges have the technology they need to provide state-of-the-art education.** Only 48 percent agree that the latest technology is available to students at community and technical colleges; 51 percent say college instructors use technology as a teaching tool; and 52 percent agree that two-year college students possess essential computer skills.
- **Two-year colleges should be both affordable and accessible.** Access and affordability issues rank second, third and fourth in importance for two-year colleges. There is a significant gap between the importance the public places on affordability and their perception of how affordable the colleges are. Respondents were also asked if they would support or oppose a tuition increase. A total of 55 percent are opposed, 25 percent are undecided and only 19 percent are supportive.
- **The public perceives improvement in the colleges' performance in every category** over the 1994 effectiveness ratings. The biggest increases came in reducing dependence on welfare, retraining unemployed workers and helping students prepare for transfer to four-year institutions. However, there are still major gaps between the importance and performance ratings in areas vital to the colleges' mission.

More statewide findings

Comparing two- and four-year institutions

- **51 percent of Washington adults say community and technical college programs are equal to or better than those of the state's four-year universities, although 28 percent say the quality of education is better at the four-year universities.** The percentage rating

quality better at four-year schools declined from 32 percent in 1994. (Total responses: 11 percent say two-year colleges are better; 28 percent say four-year institutions are better; 40 percent say the quality is about the same; and 21 percent say they don't know.)

- **Those who give the two-year colleges top marks for quality cite smaller classes and increased personal attention, a focus on job skills and instructors who concentrate on teaching.** These reasons were also at the top of the list in 1994. However, of the 11 percent preferring two-year colleges, only 22 percent named the focus on job skills training as one of their reasons; 34 percent gave this reason in 1994.
- Those who favor four-year universities (28 percent of the total) credit better quality professors, a wider variety of classes, more in-depth learning, and better facilities and more funding, also the top reasons in 1994. However, the number preferring the variety of offerings at four-year schools declined from 31 percent in 1994 to 17 percent in 1998.

College priorities & performance ratings

- Poll respondents were asked to rate the importance of addressing 13 different educational, economic and social issues at community and technical colleges. They rank **helping students learn job skills** (92 percent rate as important), **offering affordable tuition** (89 percent) and **providing greater access to higher education for Washington residents** (84 percent) as most important. This ranking is identical to 1994.
- It is significant that **even the lower-rated issues are viewed as important by a sizeable majority of Washington adults**, indicating that the public strongly supports these priorities. The three issues with the lowest percentages are providing educational opportunities for students of color (67 percent), helping new immigrants learn English (65 percent), and helping teenagers earn college credits while completing high school (60 percent).

This ranking was identical in 1994, although the lowest rated items gained in importance in 1998. For example, helping teenagers earn college credits was rated as important by 56 percent in 1994.

- Those who rated an issue as important and who had earlier described themselves as familiar with the colleges were asked to evaluate the colleges' effectiveness in addressing that issue. **Performance perceptions increased from 1994 to 1998 in every category.** This wasn't the case in the last survey, when performance perceptions were essentially the same as they had been in 1990. The biggest increases came in reducing welfare, retraining unemployed workers and transfer preparation.
- **There are gaps between the average importance ratings and performance ratings for 11 of the 13 items.** The largest gaps are in reducing dependence on welfare, affordability and reducing illiteracy. For example, 89 percent say it's important for two-year colleges to offer affordable tuition, while only 56 percent feel the colleges are effectively doing so. Other areas with significant gaps are helping students learn job skills and retraining people who are unemployed.

These are significant gaps in areas which are vital to the two-year college mission. Colleges will need to identify the **gaps between** residents' *perceptions* of the quality of college programs and the *reality* of those programs and look for ways to correct misperceptions and make improvements where needed. **Because people who are familiar with the colleges give them higher rankings, providing more information is likely to further reduce these gaps.**

- **69 percent of Washington adults support the Running Start program**, with 12 percent opposed and the remainder neutral or undecided. Support has increased significantly from 1994, when it was 60 percent. Running Start allows qualified high school students to simultaneously earn high school and college credits free of tuition.

Tuition & funding

- **Residents oppose tuition increases by almost a three-to-one margin** (55 percent opposed, 19 percent in favor, with 25 percent undecided). These numbers are almost identical to 1994. It is important to remember the gap between those who feel it's important to offer affordable tuition (89 percent) and the number who feel the colleges are effective in doing so (56 percent).
- **Support for a bond issue to fund classroom construction at two-year colleges increased from 42 percent in 1994 to 46 percent in 1998. However, comparisons between registered voters and those who are not registered present a less positive picture.** Among those not registered, 16 percent oppose a bond issue and 36 percent are neutral; among registered voters, 25 percent are opposed and only 28 percent are neutral.

Technology use & availability

- A series of technology-related questions, new to the survey in 1998, revealed concerns about technology. Only 52 percent of those surveyed agree that community and technical college students possess essential computer skills. Less than half (48 percent) agree that the latest technology is available to students. In discussion groups last spring, **business and labor leaders cited the need for more current technology and more training for students** as a major concern for two-year colleges.
- Just over half (51 percent) of respondents perceive that faculty are using technology as a teaching tool.
- **A sizeable majority – 65 percent – would take a course at a community or technical college if they wanted to expand their computer skills.**
- **The public lacks information about technology at two-year colleges.** From 39 to 45 percent responded “don't know” or were neutral on the questions about availability of the latest technology, the computer skills of graduates and the use of technology by faculty. Only 15 percent said they didn't know or were neutral about taking a course to expand computer skills.

Information sources & availability

- **The quarterly class schedule remains the leading source of information about community and technical colleges**, however the number depending on this source has dropped from 67 percent in 1994 to 57 percent in 1998. More targeted printed messages such as brochures and newsletters increased from 23 percent in 1994 to 28 percent in 1998, and newspapers went from 20 percent in 1994 to 24 percent in 1998. The most significant shift was in television, where 5 percent received information in 1994; that doubled to 10 percent in 1998.

Colleges are benefiting from using a broader spectrum of communication methods and the opportunity to reach more people. After the 1994 public opinion survey, colleges were encouraged to reduce dependence on class schedules and deliver more targeted messages.

- Most people (69 percent) say they receive enough information from colleges, but 26 percent say they want more. Only 2 percent say they receive too much information. **The respondents most likely to say they don't receive enough information are those who are younger; have children under 18 in their households; don't have a four-year degree; are not registered to vote; and have annual incomes below \$50,000.** Since print media readers tend to be older and more educated, this suggests that television and radio may be better methods for communicating with these key target populations and that other methods need to be explored.
- **More detailed information about classes and general course schedule information topped the list of requests for additional information.** Information on cost and tuition, specific degree programs and tuition assistance also made the list. Respondents were asked what, if any, information they would like to receive from their local community and technical colleges. A majority of respondents, 63 percent, say they don't want more information, up from 58 percent in 1994. However, that means 37 percent would like additional information. Leading the audience segments asking for more information were 18 to 29-year-olds (48 percent), those not registered to vote (46 percent), households with children under age 18 (43 percent), and those with some college (41 percent). The next groups (all at 40 percent) were males, those ages 30-49 and those with incomes below \$35,000.