



# Smart Investment 2002 Public Opinion Survey

## Highlights & Key Findings

September 2002

The latest statewide survey of adult Washington residents indicates:

- ☞☞70 percent of Washington state residents are familiar with community and technical colleges, and 67 percent of these residents rate the quality of education as good or excellent.
- ☞☞Job skills training continues to be the top priority for the colleges. This was also the top priority in surveys conducted in 1994 and 1998.
- ☞☞Two-year colleges should be both affordable and accessible. Access and affordability issues are ranked second, third and fourth in importance.
- ☞☞There is a significant gap between the importance the public places on affordability and their perception of how affordable the colleges are.
- ☞☞The colleges' highest area of effectiveness is their geographic accessibility.
- ☞☞Colleges are rated lowest in reducing dependence on welfare and reducing illiteracy among adults.
- ☞☞Running Start is the most highly regarded program offered by the colleges.

## 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 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 respondents perceive improvements are needed to meet their expectations. People 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 performance still lags importance by several points in almost every area. The largest gaps are in reducing dependence on welfare, offering affordable tuition and reducing illiteracy.

### Among the key findings:

👤👤 **People who know the two-year colleges are pleased with their quality.** 70 percent of Washington residents are familiar with community and technical colleges, and these people give the colleges high ratings for quality. This level of “familiarity” has remained relatively steady over the years. In the 1998 survey, 73 percent of respondents said they were familiar with the colleges; in both 1990 and 1994, 71 percent said they were familiar with the colleges.

👤👤 **When asked to rate the overall quality of education, 67 percent of people familiar with the colleges say their quality is good or excellent.** This number continues to increase over time. In 1998, 63 percent rated quality above average; in 1994, 56 percent said quality was above average.

👤👤 **Among the 30 percent who were unfamiliar with the colleges, only 34 percent rate overall quality as above average.** However, 26 percent of this group reports that they don’t know enough about the quality of education to rate it. The group that doesn’t have enough information to rate the colleges has been growing. In 1994, it was 16 percent; in 1998, it was 20 percent.

### College participation

👤👤 **51 percent of Washington residents report having attended a community or technical college in this state.** In 1998, 56 percent had attended a two-year college in Washington. In both 2002 and 1998, 39 percent said that a household member other than themselves had taken a class.

👤👤 **Job skills training, listed by 38 percent, is the number one reason for attending community and technical colleges classes.** Other primary reasons are academic transfer (34 percent) and personal enrichment (27 percent). These were also the top reasons in 1994 and 1998.

👤👤 **However, reasons for attending vary by age.** Younger students, ages 18 to 29, are most likely to attend for academic transfer courses (44 percent). Students age 50 and older attend for job skills training (42 percent) and personal enrichment (33 percent), which represents a significant shift for this age group. In 1998, those age 50 and older were equally likely to attend for job skills training and personal enrichment (40 percent each).

👤👤 **Similar to years past, convenience of location and affordability, each cited by 33 percent, remain the most influential reasons for choosing a community or technical college over any other institution.** The specific field of study offered is third at 11 percent.

### Importance: College priorities

Poll respondents were asked to rate the importance of addressing 13 different educational, economic and social issues at community and technical colleges.

- 👉👉 **Washington residents rate job skills training as the top priority for two-year colleges.** Helping students learn job skills is described as important by 90 percent of survey participants, making it the highest ranking issue addressed by two-year colleges, just as it was in 1994 and 1998.
- 👉👉 **Offering affordable tuition** (88 percent) and **providing greater access to higher education for Washington residents** (86 percent) are rated as second and third most important. These were also the second and third priorities in 1994 and 1998.
- 👉👉 Another access issue – **providing education close to home or work** – is rated fourth. The importance of geographic access has continued to increase since 1994. Today, 85 percent of statewide residents consider this important, compared to only 79 percent in 1994 and 82 percent in 1998.
- 👉👉 The next two issues – worker retraining and transfer preparation – are each rated important by 83 percent of the state’s population.
- 👉👉 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 the colleges’ role in all of these issues. The three issues with the lowest percentages are helping new immigrants learn English (69 percent), helping teenagers earn college credits while completing high school (66 percent), and increasing access through online courses (60 percent).
- 👉👉 **Rankings for the Running Start program have increased consistently from year to year.** In 1994, 56 percent rated helping teenagers earn college credits as important; in 1998, 60 percent said it was important. This year, 66 percent rate Running Start as important.

### **Effectiveness: College performance**

Those who regarded individual educational, social and economic concerns as important were asked to rate how effective the colleges are in addressing those specific concerns.

- 👉👉 **Washington state residents consider the colleges’ highest area of effectiveness to be their geographic accessibility**, with 72 percent rating the colleges as effective in this area.
- 👉👉 Running Start is the most highly regarded program, with 67 percent saying the colleges are effective in helping high school students earn college credits.
- 👉👉 Other areas where the colleges were ranked as effective by more than 60 percent of respondents were providing opportunities for a diverse population (65 percent), helping students learn skills for jobs (63 percent) and helping students prepare to transfer (62 percent).
- 👉👉 The lowest effectiveness ratings went to reducing dependence on welfare and reducing illiteracy among adults. Among those residents who consider each of these issues “important,” only 28

percent feel the colleges are effectively decreasing Washington state residents' dependence upon welfare, and only 32 percent consider the colleges' impact on adult illiteracy effective.

## **Gaps between importance & performance**

An analysis of the gaps between the average importance and average performance ratings for the educational, social and economic concerns shows that the performance ratings trail the importance ratings for 12 of the 13 items.

🗳️🗳️**Among the largest gaps are in reducing dependence on welfare and reducing illiteracy.** 79 percent believe it's important for two-year colleges to reduce dependence on welfare, while only 28 percent feel the colleges are effectively doing so. 78 percent say it's important for the colleges to reduce illiteracy among adults, but only 32 percent think the colleges are effective at this.

🗳️🗳️**The gap in affordability is sizeable.** 88 percent say it's important for two-year colleges to offer affordable tuition, while only 52 percent feel the colleges are effectively doing so.

🗳️🗳️Other areas with significant gaps are helping students learn job skills, retraining people who are unemployed and providing access to higher education for all.

🗳️🗳️The areas with the largest gaps in 2002 – reducing dependence on welfare, affordability and reducing illiteracy – also had the largest gaps in the 1994 and 1998 surveys.

## **Funding & Tuition Support**

🗳️🗳️In response to the state's shortage of healthcare professionals, 66 percent of Washington residents support additional funding to improve technology specific to the field, 61 percent are in favor of increasing enrollment in this field by offering additional classes (course sections), and 53 percent support expanding programming by offering new programs. Only 7 percent do not support additional funding for any of these options.

🗳️🗳️48 percent of residents say they support a bond issue to finance construction at community and technical colleges. This number is almost identical to 1998, when 46 percent supported this idea. In 1994, 42 percent favored a bond issue.

🗳️🗳️Given the state's budget crisis and its impact on higher education, 36 percent of Washington residents say they support a tax increase specifically for offsetting the costs of higher education and 29 percent are in favor of increasing student tuition. Only 8 percent support limiting the number of students who can enroll and 14 percent would limit the number of programs offered.

## **Future participation**

Survey participants in 2002 were asked a new series of questions about possible future participation in community and technical college classes.

📊📊 **52 percent of Washington state residents are “likely” to take a course at a community or technical college in the future.** Those most likely to attend are residents under the age of 50 with children under the age of 18 at home.

📊📊 Of those residents who may attend a community or technical college class in the future, **64 percent say time constraints are keeping them from taking classes now.**

📊📊 Potential students are interested in new program options: 48 percent of potential students say they are interested in the availability of online classes, 45 percent of potential students would consider an intensive course curriculum (offered in a time period shorter than a traditional quarter, for example), and 43 percent are interested in weekend classes.

## Technology

📊📊 A majority of residents – 65 percent – agree that the latest technology is available to students at community and technical colleges. This is a significant increase over 1998, when less than half (48 percent) believed students had access to the latest technology.

## Information sources & availability

📊📊 **The quarterly class schedule remains residents’ primary source of information about community and technical college programs,** with 61 percent mentioning it. This was also the top-rated source in 1994 (67 percent) and 1998 (57 percent).

📊📊 Newspapers and college publications other than class schedules are declining significantly as sources of information about college programs. Newspapers were cited as a source by 20 percent in 1994, 24 percent in 1998 and only 18 percent in 2002. Printed materials such as brochures and newsletters were cited a source by 23 percent in 1994, 28 percent in 1998 and only 13 percent in 2002.

📊📊 Another big decline was in television as a source of information about college programs. Television was cited by 5 percent in 1994, it climbed to 10 percent in 1998 and went back to 5 percent in 2002.

📊📊 **The Internet appears to be picking up the slack from other media as 12 percent cited it as an information source in 2002.** In 1998, only 2 percent of residents identified the Internet as a source of information about the colleges.

📊📊 Similar to years past, most Washington state residents (72 percent) feel they are receiving just enough information from the colleges.

📊📊 The number of residents who say they do not receive enough information – 21 percent – has declined significantly since 1998 (26 percent).

☞☞The respondents most likely to say they don't receive enough information are those who are younger (ages 18-29), have children under age 18 at home, have little or no college experience, are not registered to vote, or have annual incomes below \$35,000.

## **Survey background & methodology**

Conducted by Market Research Services of Bellevue for the Smart Investment Committee, the survey measures public opinion about the importance and effectiveness of college programs, interest in future participation in college classes, support for funding to provide programs and facilities, satisfaction with information received from the colleges and other issues. Results are also compared with the findings of similar surveys conducted in 1998 and 1994 and, where applicable, with the 1990 survey which formed the basis for the system's initial Smart Investment campaign.

A total of 1,190 adult Washington residents were interviewed by telephone from May 30 through June 18, 2002, to determine their familiarity with and attitudes toward the state's 34 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.

The overall sample size of 1,190 yields a statewide reliability of plus-or-minus 2.9 percent at the 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.