



## Opinion: New Jerseyans have ideas on how to make good college value even better

TCNJ Grad.JPG

Recent graduates cheer after the turning of the tassel ceremony during The College of New Jersey commencement last month. *(Kristen Vaughn for The Times of Trenton)*

**Times of Trenton guest opinion column** By **Times of Trenton guest opinion column**

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**By Darryl Greer**

A Stockton College Polling Institute survey of New Jersey residents brings a ray of hope that can help students get more bang for the buck by earning a college degree. Completing college faster, with more valuable skills to prepare them for good jobs, careers and a better life, were identified in the poll as the topmost desirable outcomes of attending college.

Specifically, the May-June poll, administered for the Higher Education Strategic Information and Governance (HESIG) project of Stockton and supported by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) Center for Advocacy and Philanthropy and the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy, found that approximately three-fourths of residents think that New Jersey colleges provide excellent or good education; and 90 percent of those who have had some college experience value college as worth the cost, despite continuing concern about college affordability.

These new findings, together with Stockton's 2013 HESIG poll on college affordability and completion, other New Jersey studies and recent comprehensive national research by Pew, Gallup and Northeastern University, lead to some concrete policy recommendations for reform to increase college opportunity, affordability, degree completion and value.

Citizens clearly recognize that they have a stake in making college worthwhile. For example, the Stockton poll indicates that residents accept the need to make better academic choices and to study harder as a way to increase college value. They indicate, too, that they need to seek out more work-related experiences linked to academic studies while in college, such as internships.

A very positive message is that citizens and business leaders are on the same page regarding the need for more practical, hands-on experiences and important skills and abilities gained from a college education. Among eight skills and abilities poll respondents could choose from as "very important," those cited by four out of five residents were writing, communicating and problem solving — also the top skills cited by New Jersey business leaders in focus groups held at Stockton College and New Jersey City University.

Some of the survey's significant insights for change are directed at colleges and universities. While colleges are viewed as high in quality and value, 86 percent of residents polled say that colleges need to change educational and financial practices "a lot" or "some," to provide better value. Some of the needed changes include:

- more practical, work-related experiences while in college, tied to job and career prospects;
- better academic and career counseling to help students make better choices;
- easier transfer of credits to reduce time to graduation and cost, and
- more content courses in the major to strengthen critical academic skills.

The Stockton findings suggest some important policy changes that would help add to the value of a college degree. These include:

- partnerships with schools to teach subjects and skills needed to succeed in college and the workforce, and college-level credit available at the high school level to help shorten time to complete a degree and reduce cost;
- close cooperation with community colleges to smooth course credit transfer and to build "reverse degree" programs that allow students to complete an associate's degree at a four-year college after transferring from a community college;
- partnerships with business to help build programs that combine workforce and academic skills and create internships;
- reduction in number of degree credits required for graduation by giving credit for knowledge gained outside of college;
- reformed student financial aid programs to meet the needs of students by type of institution and program of study, rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, in order to help students afford college, and
- a clearly articulated set of specific skills college graduates are expected to master, such as effective writing, speaking and decision-making.

Clearly, not everyone has to go to college to have a better life. But global research by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) shows that citizens who have access to postsecondary education live better lives, as measured by type of jobs, earnings, nutrition, health and family structure. Moreover, as studies of the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce indicate, without a strong national (or New Jersey) policy on workforce development for citizens who don't attend college,

postsecondary education becomes by default the most significant way to develop the skills needed to compete and prosper in the 21st century.

Accordingly, under the banner of "Finding Solutions, Building Public Trust in an Era of Change," Stockton's HESIG program will use citizens' opinions to help guide educators, business leaders and elected officials to achieve strategies to enhance the value of college in the Garden State.

*Darryl G. Greer is senior fellow for higher education strategic information and governance at the William J. Hughes Center for Public Policy at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.*



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