

**SUMMARY OF EXISTING RESEARCH ON ATTITUDES TOWARD
LIBERAL EDUCATION OUTCOMES FOR THE
ASSOCIATION OF AMERICAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES**

AUGUST 2004

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In this report, we attempt to summarize key findings related to the importance that various audiences ascribe to key outcomes of a college education associated with a liberal education. The findings are culled from diverse sources and studies conducted as early as 1996 and as recently as 2004. Each study is based on a unique questionnaire that approaches the issue in a specific way. Although these studies do not provide apples-to-apples comparisons of the importance of college outcomes among different audiences, they yield a general sense of which outcomes are most important to which audiences. This report presents an overview of common findings from these diverse studies.

It is important to make two points regarding the presentation of findings. First, in cases in which two studies offer conflicting findings, we base our interpretations on the more recent data; second, in cases in which actual proportions from a study are not available, we include the key findings from the study's research summary.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

As the following table illustrates, the existing research suggests that a wide variety of outcomes are associated with college curricula beyond the acquisition of job-specific skills. Indeed, key stakeholder groups identify several cornerstones of a liberal education as essential outcomes of higher education. Critical thinking and problem-solving skills, as well as the ability to communicate effectively are rated as among the most important outcomes of college by business executives and parents of college-bound youth, while leadership skills are seen as very important by the general public. A disconnect exists between AAC&U and these stakeholder groups, however, regarding the importance of civic responsibility and cultural and global awareness. Both the existing research as well as the focus group discussions that we conducted suggest that the AAC&U faces a significant challenge in demonstrating the importance of these two outcomes as they relate to the college curriculum, and the role that liberal education has in linking the two.

Most Important Outcomes of College

	<u>AAC&U</u>	<u>HS/college students</u>	<u>Parents</u>	<u>General public</u>	<u>Business executives</u>
Sense of maturity	✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	
Time-management skills	✓	✓✓			
Strong work habits	✓	✓✓	✓		✓✓
Self-discipline	✓	✓✓			✓✓
Teamwork skills	✓✓	✓✓	✓		✓✓
Tangible business skills		✓			
Critical thinking skills	✓✓	✓	✓✓		✓✓
Communication skills	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓
Problem-solving skills	✓✓	✓	✓✓	✓	✓✓
Business world exposure		✓			
Leadership skills	✓✓	✓		✓✓	
Values, morals, ethics	✓✓			✓	✓
Tolerance/cultural respect	✓✓		✓	✓	✓
Computer skills	✓		✓✓	✓	✓✓
Cultural/global awareness	✓✓				✓✓
Civic responsibility	✓✓			✓✓	

Note: This table includes research findings from various studies and recommendations from diverse sources, and are not meant to serve as parallel comparisons.

IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF COLLEGE: THE GENERAL PUBLIC

This section is based on the following studies:

- *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education*, conducted February – March 2004 by GDA Integrated Services for *The Chronicle*
 - Telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults age 25 to 65, margin of error $\pm 3.1\%$
- *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents – White, African American and Hispanic – View Higher Education*, key findings from a survey conducted December 1999 by Public Agenda for The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
 - Telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,015 adults age 18 or older, margin of error $\pm 3.0\%$; interviews also conducted among 202 African American, 202 Hispanic, and 201 white parents of children in high school, margin of error $\pm 7.0\%$
- *National Survey of Voters*, conducted July – August 1998 by DYG, Inc., for The Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative.
 - Telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 2,011 registered voters, margin of error $\pm 2.2\%$; oversamples among 200 voters each in Arizona, California, Georgia, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Tennessee

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The public recognizes a number of important outcomes associated with a college education. For most people, obtaining a college degree is considered an essential step toward building a career. Existing research findings suggest, however, that a diploma represents a great deal more than the sum of the classes that a graduate completed. The public holds a long list of expectations for colleges and universities, emphasizing that higher education curricula should go beyond providing academic knowledge and skills and should facilitate the development of the whole person.

Top-Tier Outcomes

- Career preparation
- Sense of maturity
- Civic responsibility
- Leadership skills

Although the public recognizes several important outcomes of college, the top-tier outcomes are those that produce individuals who are prepared to meet the expectations of the professional world and the community in which they will live. The recent *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education* (GDA Integrated Services, February–March 2004) suggests that the public's most top-of-mind issue is career preparation. Seven in 10 (70%) Americans say that **preparing undergraduate students for a career** is a very important role that a college or university should play, and an additional 22% say that it is an important role. A smaller but still impressive 62% of adults consider **providing an education to adults so they qualify for a better job** to be very important and 26% consider it to be important.

The public places as much value on **preparing students to be responsible citizens**: more than two in three (67%) adults regard this as very important, 18% cite it as important. Additionally, almost nine in 10 Americans say that **preparing future leaders of society** is either very important (66%) or important (21%). In its consideration of the most important outcomes of college, the public clearly recognizes that higher education not only provides students with tools for achieving professional success, but it also molds graduates into conscientious and contributing members of their communities and society as a whole.

Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents . . . View Higher Education (Public Agenda for The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, December 1999) offers a slightly different view of the public's priorities. In this survey, the public places the greatest emphasis on college outcomes that produce mature, independent individuals who are tolerant of people from different backgrounds. Roughly seven in 10 (71%) Americans deem it absolutely essential for students to **gain a sense of maturity and how to manage on their own**, and 26% regard this as important, but not essential. Slightly more than two thirds (68%) say that **an ability to get along with people who are different from themselves** is an absolutely essential skill for college graduates, and 29% say that it is important, but not essential.

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The *National Survey of Voters* (DYG, Inc., for Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative, July–August 1998) reveals that registered voters focus most on career preparation among the important outcomes of college. By contrast to the previously mentioned research, this survey finds voters focused on the importance of colleges’ providing the skills and training needed for career success. A strong majority (85%) of voters say that **providing education in basic skills** is a very important goal of higher education. In addition, more than seven in 10 (72%) voters believe that **career training or re-training** is a very important goal of higher education

Middle-Tier Outcomes

- Broad-based general education
- Preparation for postgraduate education
- Values, morals, ethics
- Tolerance, cultural respect
- Problem-solving skills
- Communication skills
- Computer skills

In its middle tier of expectations for college outcomes, the focus of the American public (in *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education*, GDA Integrated Services, February–March 2004) shifts from overarching expectations to more specific aspects of the academic curriculum and the social experiences in college. Nearly six in 10 (58%) Americans consider **offering a broad-based general education to undergraduates** to be very important, and 29% consider it to be important. Along the same lines, the public also identifies **preparation for postgraduate education** as important, with slightly more than half (53%) saying it is very important and 31% saying it is important.

As we have noted, the role of college in developing the whole person is important to the American public. This is confirmed in the 2004 *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education*, in which 58% of Americans say that **helping students develop good values and ethical positions** is very important and 23% say that this is important. In addition, the public emphasizes the importance of students’ developing intercultural skills while in college. A majority (55%) of adults view **teaching students to get along with people from different backgrounds** as very important and 24% regard this as important. The 1998 *National Survey of Voters* reinforces these findings, as **preparing people to function in a more diverse work force** (69% very important goal) and **preparing people to function in a more diverse society** (67%) are among voters’ mid-tier priorities.

It is evident that in the 1999 *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents . . . View Higher Education*, the public’s focus for middle-tier outcomes is on specific skills associated with career preparation. Slightly more than six in 10 (63%) adults say that **an improved ability to solve problems and think analytically** is an absolutely essential skill or experience to obtain in college, and 34% regard it as important, but not essential. Nearly as many (61%) Americans believe that it is

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absolutely essential for students to **learn high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet**; 35% say that this is important, but not essential. Three in five (60%) adults cite **gaining specific expertise and knowledge in the career of interest** as absolutely essential; 35% see this as important, but not essential. Additionally, 57% of adults feel that **developing top-notch writing and speaking skills** is absolutely essential, and 38% believe that this is important, but not essential.

Bottom-Tier Outcomes

In the 2004 *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education*, the outcomes that the public ranks as least important range from international exchange experiences to minority advancement to research opportunities. Half (49%) of Americans say that **discovering more about the world through research** is very important, and 30% feel that this is important; 47% regard **preparing students from minority groups to become successful** as very important, and 29% see this is important; 28% rate **promoting international understanding by encouraging students to study in other countries** as very important, and 29% regard this as important.

Note: The findings of two surveys reveal a notable divergence of opinion about the degree to which civic responsibility is an important outcome of college. In 1999, the *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents . . . View Higher Education* found only 44% of Americans believing that it is absolutely essential for students to learn **“the responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering.”** By contrast, the more recent 2004 *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education* finds 67% of Americans saying that it is very important for colleges to **prepare students to be responsible citizens**. Although this discrepancy certainly may be related to variations in question wording and response scales, the significant difference in the public’s evaluation of this outcome makes it difficult to determine whether a shift has occurred in the public’s view of this issue.

Appendix A includes more detailed results from the studies discussed.

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IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF COLLEGE: PARENTS OF COLLEGE-BOUND YOUTH

The findings in this section are drawn from the following studies:

- *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents – White, African American and Hispanic – View Higher Education*, key findings from a survey conducted December 1999 by Public Agenda for The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education
 - Telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,015 adults age 18 or older, margin of error $\pm 3.0\%$; interviews also conducted among 202 African American, 202 Hispanic, and 201 white parents of children in high school, margin of error $\pm 7.0\%$; “high-school parents” subgroup comprises 163 such parents from the overall sample and 37 white high-school parents from the oversample, margin of error $\pm 6.9\%$
- *The Status of Liberal Arts in the United States*, key findings from surveys conducted winter/spring 1996 by DYG, Inc., for The Office of the President, Hobart and William Smith Colleges
 - Telephone survey among 907 respondents, including parents of college-bound high-school juniors and seniors (151), college-bound high-school juniors and seniors (153), senior managers (101) and human resource executives (100) in business, high school faculty and administrators (100), college faculty and administrators (100), graduates of small liberal arts colleges (100), graduates of universities or specialty schools (102); margin of error $\pm 8.0\%$ for parents of college-bound high-school students

While these two studies offer slightly different views of parents’ priorities for specific college outcomes (which is partially attributed to the studies’ timing and question phrasing), the overarching findings suggest that parents place the greatest emphasis on outcomes that give students the tools they will need to succeed at the next level. It is important to note that parents do not regard civic responsibility or leadership skills as important skills in either of these studies.

In the 1999 *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents . . . View Higher Education* study, the findings suggest that parents of high-school students consider outcomes associated with getting a job and career building to be essential. As the following table illustrates, however, they place emphasis both on development of job-specific, technical skills as well as on maturity, independence, and tolerance.

HIGH-SCHOOL PARENTS' ASSESSMENT OF COLLEGE OUTCOMES

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college?

	Absolutely Essential	Important, But Not Essential
	%	%
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own	68	30
An ability to get along with people different from themselves	66	33
An improved ability to solve problems and think analytically	66	31
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet	66	31
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they've chosen	60	34
Top-notch writing and speaking skills	59	39
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering	40	56
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history	31	57

The 1996 *Status of Liberal Arts in the United States* research reveals that parents of college-bound youth consider college to be an essential step toward a successful career and a satisfying life, as nine in 10 parents in this study say that attending college is very important and a strong majority (75%) say that the primary reason to attend college is to get a better job or build a career. The priority for most of these parents is that the college curriculum should provide students with the specific knowledge and skills necessary to meet the demands of today's diverse job market. However, although these parents are considerably more likely to value career skills over personal values and life skills, they identify a wide variety of outcomes as contributing to success in the job market. The following table highlights the most important outcomes for these parents of college-bound youth.

**MOST IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF HIGHER EDUCATION
FOR PARENTS OF COLLEGE-BOUND TEENS**

	<u>Very Important Goal of Higher Education*</u>
	%
Developing problem-solving skills	89
Developing critical-thinking skills	87
Developing strong work habits	84
Developing writing and oral skills	81
Learning how to adapt to new careers	78
Computer literacy	77
Professional school preparation	73
Learning technical skills	71
Exposure to business world	68

* ratings of "8," "9," or "10" on a 10-point scale

The Status of Liberal Arts in the United States also suggests that, because parents of college-bound youth are so focused on the relationship between college and career-oriented outcomes, they differentiate between outcomes that are important for obtaining the first job out of college and those that are important for long-term career growth. The outcomes that are perceived to be important in the short-term are predominantly technical, job-related skills, as outlined in the following list.

Outcomes Important for Obtaining Initial Job:

- Exposure to the business world
- Technical skills
- Business related skills
- Computer literacy

As they evaluate outcomes in the context of career building, parent's priorities are very much in line with those of liberal education. In *The Status of Liberal Arts in the United States*, parents identify an array of skills that they consider important for the long-term.

Outcomes Important for Career Building:

- Problem-solving skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Communication skills
- Ability to adapt
- Global perspective
- Tolerance and respect for others
- Loyalty and integrity
- Exposure to diverse ideas
- Time management
- Life long connections

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Although parents in *The Status of Liberal Arts in the United States* study place highest priority on career-oriented skills, they also recognize the following outcomes that are not directly linked to gaining employment or career building.

Additional Outcomes:

- Self-discipline
- Living on one's own
- Respect for others/tolerance
- Exposure to diverse ideas
- Learning for its own sake

IMPORTANT OUTCOMES OF COLLEGE: BUSINESS EXECUTIVES

The findings in this section are drawn from the following studies:

- *Employee Characteristics and Skills Valued by Northern Virginia Employers*, key findings from a survey conducted December 2000 by Northern Virginia Community College Office of Institutional Research
 - Interviews among 1,621 Northern Virginia employers, 279 telephone interviews and 1,342 mail interviews, margin of error $\pm 2.4\%$.
- *Campus Diversity Initiative Survey of Washington Businesses* conducted August 1998 by Elway Research, Inc., in collaboration with seven Seattle-area colleges and universities for the Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative.
 - Mail survey among 139 business members of the Seattle and Spokane Chambers of Commerce who employ more than 25 people, margin of error $\pm 8.3\%$
- *The Status of Liberal Arts in the United States*, key findings from surveys conducted winter/spring 1996 by DYG, Inc., for The Office of the President, Hobart and William Smith Colleges
 - Telephone survey among 907 respondents, including parents of college-bound high-school juniors and seniors (151), college-bound high-school juniors and seniors (153), senior managers (101) and human resource executives (100) in business, high school faculty and administrators (100), college faculty and administrators (100), graduates of small liberal arts colleges (100), graduates of universities or specialty schools (102); margin of error $\pm 9.8\%$ for senior managers and human resources executive samples separately, $\pm 6.9\%$ for the two samples combined

Not surprisingly, this stakeholder group of business executives confirms the importance of students' acquiring the skills and traits to make them competitive in today's challenging and

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diverse job market. It is notable that, although business executives recognize outcomes associated with specific job skills, they place the greatest emphasis on the skills and characteristics needed for career building. The most important outcomes for this group range from critical thinking skills and analytical aptitude to communication and interpersonal skills. In none of the three studies do business executives identify leadership qualities as important.

The 1996 *Status of Liberal Arts in the United States* study conducted among 101 senior managers and 100 human resource executives suggests that business executives generally see eye-to-eye with the public as they consider important outcomes of college. The business community, however, places stronger emphasis on the importance of college for developing the whole person, and cites outcomes associated with both academic and social development. Noting the diverse nature of the job market today and the professional world in general, business executives argue that graduates who possess a broad variety of skills and values will have the greatest success in the work force.

When asked to rank several specific outcomes associated with the college curriculum in terms of their importance, senior managers and human resource executives identify the following outcomes as essential for obtaining the initial job out of college.

Outcomes Important for Obtaining Initial Job:

- Computer literacy
- Business-related skills
- Exposure to the business world
- Strong work habits
- Technical skills
- Communication skills
- Critical thinking skills
- Preparation for professional school

Senior managers, who focus more on the importance of career building than on getting the first job, stress the importance of developing skills that promote successful career building. In doing so, their priority shifts from professional and technical skills to those more commonly associated with liberal education, as they cite the following outcomes.

Outcomes Important for Career Building:

- Critical thinking skills
- Strong oral communication skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Self-discipline
- Developing one's own ideals

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Employee Characteristics and Skills Valued by Northern Virginia Employers offers additional insight into the priority that potential employers place on developing career-related skills and characteristics. It is important to note that this study was conducted only among North Virginia employers, not among employers nationwide. In addition, parallel comparisons cannot be drawn with the 1996 *Status of Liberal Arts in the United States* study, as the issues in the Northern Virginia study were not framed in the context of outcomes of a college curriculum. Having noted these differences, however, we believe that the Northern Virginia research offers an interesting perspective on employer preferences.

Many Northern Virginia employers value interpersonal skills, motivation to succeed, and aptitude more than they do job-specific and technical skills. As the research findings illustrate, employers prefer a job candidate who has foundational knowledge and skills coupled with a strong work ethic and ability to learn. The following table presents the skills and characteristics that Northern Virginia employers regard as most important.

EVALUATION OF SELECTED EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS		
	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>
	%	%
Communication abilities	73	21
Work ethics	72	23
Ability to learn on the job	63	32
Motivation or initiative	59	34
Working with others	59	33

As we move down their list of preferences, we find that Northern Virginia employers' focus shifts from broad social skills and personality traits to more specific skills that might be learned in college. Although employers recognize these skills as important, a considerable drop-off occurs between this second tier of skills and characteristics and the ones that they rank as most important.

EVALUATION OF SELECTED EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS		
	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>
	%	%
Ability to solve job problems	48	39
Interpersonal skills	43	40
Reading/comprehension skills	41	32
Overall preparation for employment	37	42

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As the following table shows, the skills and characteristics that employers value least include those that are most job-specific or technical.

EVALUATION OF SELECTED EMPLOYEE CHARACTERISTICS		
	<u>Very Important</u>	<u>Important</u>
	%	%
Special technical job skills	30	29
Computer skills	29	30
Familiarity with job equipment	28	30
Analytical aptitude	21	38
Mathematical skills	20	32
Work experience	16	29
Leadership abilities	16	29
GPA or academic credentials	6	19

The 1998 *Campus Diversity Initiative Survey of Washington Businesses* among members of the greater Seattle and Spokane Area Chambers of Commerce examines business leaders' perceptions regarding the role of colleges and universities in career development and regarding diversity's impact on the college curriculum. The research, although different in nature from the other two studies, suggests that members of Seattle and Spokane business communities believe that higher education plays an important role in preparing students for success in the workforce. They also value diversity within the college curriculum and see diversity as a key contributor to development of several important skills.

When asked to evaluate the importance of three higher education goals, at least seven in 10 Seattle and Spokane business leaders rate all three as either very important or important, including:

- Career training and re-training (92% say this is important, including 64% who say it is very important);
- Preparation to function in a more diverse workforce (84% important, including 46% very important); and
- Creating a better quality of life in Washington State (73% important, including 34% very important).

Furthermore, 91% agree (54% strongly agree and 37% agree) with the statement, **“College is not doing its job if its graduates are not prepared to enter the job market.”** Although Seattle and Spokane business leaders clearly place the greatest emphasis on career preparation, they also recognize other important aspects of the college curriculum, such as exposure to different cultures and the ability to work with people from different backgrounds. Nearly eight in 10 (77%) either strongly agree (40%) or agree that **“College is not doing its job if its graduates cannot get along in a**

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diverse workforce.” In addition, a strong majority (70%) agree (25% strongly agree and 45% agree) that **“every college graduate should have to study different cultures in order to graduate.”**

Concerning the impact of diversity on several key outcomes associated with the college curriculum, majorities of Seattle and Spokane area business executives believe that students are more likely to acquire all of these important career skills, “if course instruction includes attention to diversity and diverse perspectives,” as the following table shows.

IMPACT OF DIVERSITY ON ACQUISITION OF SELECTED SKILLS			
<i>If college courses included teaching about diversity, would students be more likely or less likely to learn selected skills?</i>			
	More likely	Neutral	Less likely
	%	%	%
Communication skills	75	19	6
Flexibility	70	27	4
Teamwork skills	68	29	4
Civic participation skills	62	35	4
Problem-solving skills	53	38	9

APPENDIX A

IMPORTANT ROLES FOR COLLEGE TO PERFORM*

	<u>Very Important</u> %	<u>Important</u> %	<u>Somewhat important</u> %	<u>Not important</u> %
Prepare undergraduate students for a career	70	22	7	1
Prepare students to be responsible citizens	67	18	11	3
Prepare future leaders of society	66	21	11	2
Provide education to adults so they qualify for better jobs	62	26	11	1
Offer a broad-based general education to undergraduates	58	29	12	2
Help students develop good values and ethical positions	58	23	15	5
Teach students to get along with people from different backgrounds	55	24	16	5
Prepare undergraduate students for graduate or professional school	53	31	14	1
Discover more about the world through research	49	30	18	2
Prepare students from minority groups to become successful	47	29	17	7
Promote international understanding by encouraging students to study in other countries	28	29	31	11
Provide cultural events for the community	27	29	33	11

* From *Survey of Public Opinion on Higher Education*, telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,000 adults age 25 to 65, conducted February – March 2004 by GDA Integrated Services for *The Chronicle*, margin of error $\pm 3.1\%$

IMPORTANCE OF SELECTED OUTCOMES OF A COLLEGE EDUCATION*

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college?

	General Public		High-school Parents	
	<u>Absolutely essential</u>	<u>Important but not essential</u>	<u>Absolutely essential</u>	<u>Important but not essential</u>
	%	%	%	%
A sense of maturity and how to manage on their own	71	26	68	30
An ability to get along with people different from themselves	68	29	66	33
An improved ability to solve problems and think analytically	63	34	66	31
Learning high-tech skills, such as using computers and the Internet	61	35	66	31
Specific expertise and knowledge in the careers they've chosen	60	35	60	34
Top-notch writing and speaking skills	57	38	59	39
The responsibilities of citizenship, such as voting and volunteering	44	47	40	56
Exposure to great writers and thinkers in subjects like literature and history	32	53	31	57

* From *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents – White, African American and Hispanic – View Higher Education*, telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 1,015 adults age 18 or older (margin of error $\pm 3.0\%$) and among 202 African American, 202 Hispanic, and 201 white parents of children in high school (margin of error $\pm 7.0\%$); interviews conducted December 1999 by Public Agenda for The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

VOTERS' GOALS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION*

	Very important <u>goal</u> %
Providing education in basic skills	85
Career training or re-training	72
Preparing people to function in a more diverse work force	69
Creating a better quality of life in your state	69
Preparing people to function in a more diverse society	67
Preparing people for effective participation and leadership	56

* From *National Survey of Voters*, telephone survey among a nationally representative sample of 2,011 registered voters, with oversamples in AZ, CA, GA, MA, PA, TN, conducted July – August 1998 by DYG, Inc., for The Ford Foundation Campus Diversity Initiative, overall margin of error $\pm 2.2\%$
