



College Futures Foundation

Qualitative Research Summary

Groups Conducted:

October and November, 2015



David Binder Research

Overview

This research project was designed to explore overall views towards higher education in California, with a focus on how voters understand higher education financing and budgeting facts and issues, as well as how they react to specific message statements framing the challenge. Topics covered included:

- ✓ Opinions on higher education generally
- ✓ View of issues in higher education
- ✓ Discussion of tuition and access at California's public higher education institutions
- ✓ Review of framing statements on the importance of improving public education
- ✓ Discussion of financing in higher education
 - Understanding of financing basics
 - Feelings towards whether current funding is sufficient or more is needed
 - Assessment of the link between tuition and the state budget
 - Feelings on accepting more out-of-state students
- ✓ Review of budgeting process, including a discussion of annual budget and multi-year budgets
- ✓ In Sacramento, Fresno and Bakersfield only:
 - A handout on the current funding system was provided to assess reactions
 - Statements were read on the current outcomes in higher education, such as the graduation gap between White and Latino students

The discussion guide was flexible and varied depending upon participant reaction to the problems facing higher education in California, the framing statements, and information about how higher education is financed. Over the course of the six nights of focus groups, the discussion guide was updated and revised, although the guide stayed very consistent overall. Also, some questions were added depending upon the group, such as asking business leaders specifically about the role of the business community in higher education.

Demographic Composition

The 18 focus groups were conducted in Riverside, Los Angeles, Fremont, Sacramento, Fresno and Bakersfield in October and November of 2015. Most focus groups consisted of 8 participants, with a few groups consisting of 9 participants.

The specific demographic composition of the groups is outlined in the table below:

Location and Date	Composition
Riverside, CA October 15 th , 2015	Independent Activists
	Latino, 35-49, Democrats and Independents
	Latino, 18-34, Democrats and Independents
Los Angeles, CA October 19 th , 2015	White, 50+, Democrats and Independents
	African American, 25-59, Democrats and Independents
	Business owners, mix of parties
Fremont, CA October 21 st , 2015	Democrat Activists
	South Asian, 25-59, mix of parties
	Chinese, 25-59, mix of parties
Sacramento, CA October 26 th , 2015	White, 35-49, Republicans and Independents
	Mixed ethnicity, current students, 18-24, mix of parties
	Business owners, mix of parties
Fresno, CA November 3 rd , 2015	White, 50+, Republicans and Independents
	Mixed ethnicity, mix of recent grads, 25-34, mix of parties
	Business owners, mix of parties
Bakersfield, CA November 4 th , 2015	Republican Activists
	Latino, 50-69, Democrats and Independents
	Latino, 18-34, Democrats and Independents
TOTAL: 146 Participants	



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

California voters care deeply about the state's higher education system and have no doubts about the importance of its role in education California's youth and preparing young people for the jobs of the future.

Voters are very clear in their belief that the cost of an education in California's public colleges and universities is too high. They feel assured that costs are rising and will continue to rise without intervening action.

They believe that it is harder and harder for students to finish their college education in four years and routinely tell stories of family members and acquaintances in California's public colleges being unable to enroll in desired classes, and the added costs when degrees are delayed. There is agreement across age, geography and ethnicity about the challenges to complete a degree in four years given the lack of access to classes.

Also, there is consensus across the groups that more and more students are graduating without the skills necessary to acquire a good job. Instead, they say, students graduate with crippling debt. Among some younger participants, there are stories about themselves or friends who chose not to attend college because of costs and worries about debt.

Most participants assume that wasteful spending occurs with the state's higher education system, even if they disagree as to the extent. Many participants will point to high salaries by administrators in the system or provide other examples of unnecessary spending that failed to improve student access or achievement.

And many are aware that California's public colleges and universities have been admitting a higher proportion of out-of-state and foreign students which has reduced slots for qualified California young people, and state with confidence that this is a deliberate and misguided attempt to increase revenues to the system.

But as much as voters are clear on these points, on many issues, they are confused or uninformed. They have mixed opinions on whether there is currently enough space in California's public colleges and universities to admit every qualified California young person who seeks to attend. They are not at all clear on how California's colleges and universities are funded. There is divided opinion on whether the system currently receives enough total funding, or needs a new infusion of funds.

Some differences emerge in views of higher education when comparing across age, region, ethnicity, and engagement level (such as activists or business people). For many Republican participants and older participants, language around equity-defined issues in higher education is largely rejected. Many of these participants believe that opportunity exists in today's system, despite the problems that they admit exist, and that it is not the job of higher education in California to provide access for every single Californian student.

Among millennials, and also many of the Latino and African American participants, there is a more positive response to the messages that focus on the attainment gaps among people of color. Many express concern when hearing that 44% of white and second-generation Asian students have either BA or graduate degrees – compared to 15% for African American and Latino students.

When messaging, it is important to use language highlighting that only *interested and qualified* students should find higher education in California accessible. This is particularly important language with older participants, Republicans, and among business owners. There is less worry among these groups about a shortfall in college degrees overall, but a greater concern that students in college are not graduating with the necessary skills.



There is consensus among most participants – across age, region, party and ethnicity – over colleges not providing the skills necessary for a career.

Voters express very little knowledge about how budgeting works for the state’s higher education system. Voters presume that more oversight and transparency is needed, although it is apparent that few voters have sought out whether information is available. Although few have a grasp of the specific details of the higher education budgeting process, many are aware of the phenomenon in which government agencies are required to spend their entire budgets or lose funding for the following year. There is an assumption that this system—which is seen as wasteful and counterintuitive—is pervasive in higher education.

There is also a lack of clarity about exactly who should be responsible for enacting the necessary changes to the system, with many placing the impetus on elected officials and college administrators, while also insisting that families must take responsibility for kids making good decisions early in life.

On the subject of whether an annual budget or a multi-year budget is preferable, participants debate the merits of each. Some place their faith in a multi-year budget to allow for better planning and protect against yearly tuition changes, while others feel an annual budget provides for greater accountability and flexibility to adjust spending to economic changes.

At the end of the lengthy discussion about the problems in higher education in California, many participants appear willing to mobilize for change in the higher education system. They readily admit that without change, the economy of the state will be damaged, as fewer Californians will be prepared for needed jobs. Some even talk about social strife should the higher education system not reform, even if unclear exactly what reforms are necessary.

Finally, voters firmly reject the idea that the problem is unsolvable. Many bristle at the suggestion that we, as a state, cannot do better. Just the suggestion of not trying to address the problem causes voters to emotionally voice that we must.

