

College Education Seen as Essential

By JODI WILGOREN MAY 4, 2000

In a shift that experts attribute to the changing economy, higher education is increasingly seen as the ticket to the middle class, with 87 percent of Americans saying "a college education has become as important as a high school diploma used to be," a new study has found.

Seven years ago, a majority of Americans believed that too many people were going to college rather than directly into technical trades like plumbing or computer repair; now, 3 out of 4 think the country could never have too many college graduates. The study shows that 77 percent of Americans believe college is more important now than a decade ago.

"The market demands it," a woman from Old Bridge, N.J., said in one of several focus-group discussions held around the country as part of the study. "Before, you could get a good job with a high school graduation. Now, you need a college degree, a master's or even a Ph.D."

More than 60 percent of parents of high school students see a college education as "absolutely necessary" for their children. Even more noteworthy are the views of minorities, whose enrollment in higher education lags behind that of whites. When asked to choose the single factor that most determines success, 67 percent of Hispanic parents and 45 percent of African-American parents picked a college education, compared with 35 percent of parents over all.

"There has been this coalescing of opinion in this country around the notion that college is critical to opportunity," said Patrick M. Callan, president of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, a research group in San Jose, Calif. "It isn't just a piece of paper. It's a necessary factor for middle-class life."

The \$315,000 project on attitudes about education was financed by three groups that study education policy, and conducted by Public Agenda, an organization in New York that conducts in-depth research on various issues. It began with telephone interviews of 1,015 adults -- particularly parents -- in December, and included in-depth discussions with groups in six cities.

The strong support for higher education among minority parents, experts said, belies the oft-stated view that one barrier to black and Hispanic enrollment is the low priority those ethnic

groups placed on college. Only 20 percent of Hispanics ages 18 to 24 are enrolled in college, compared with 37 percent of non-Hispanic whites, yet more than twice as many Hispanic parents (65 percent) as white ones (32 percent) believe a college education is necessary to be successful in today's working world, according to the new poll.

"This is a pattern that we've been waiting to see emerge," said Robert Zemsky, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania and director of the Institute for Research on Higher Education. "It now follows other groups that have seen higher education as a means of transformation. The Jewish community, the Italian community, the Asian community -- now we're seeing it in the African-American and the Hispanic community."

When asked what students should gain from attending college, those surveyed emphasized job-related skills rather than the traditional tenets of the liberal arts. Sixty percent said computer proficiency and specific expertise in a chosen career were "absolutely essential" outcomes, while just 32 percent gave that level of importance to "exposure to great writers and thinkers" in literature and history. At the top of the list were basic skills in living, including a sense of maturity and an ability to get along with diverse people.

"All of us in the academic world like to think that the purpose of higher education is to master the great philosophies and read the great books," said Stanley O. Ikenberry, president of the American Council on Education, which represents 3,500 colleges and universities. "But the public, throughout this past century, has really seen education in very instrumental, very practical terms."

While 71 percent of those polled think paying for college is more difficult than it was a decade ago -- and 4 out of 5 say students have to borrow too much money to pay tuition -- an overwhelming 93 percent of parents are confident that they will find a way to work out the cost of higher education. Still, 69 percent of parents worry about meeting college expenses and 61 percent say they "should have done more" to prepare financially.

Asked about various forms of financial aid, more of those polled favored tax credits and work-study programs than loans or direct grants to students. Fewer people (47 percent) believe there are many qualified applicants who lack the opportunity to attend college now than who believed so in 1993 (60 percent).

"If the desire is there, you make a way for your children," a Philadelphia parent said in a focus group.