

SECTION VI CONCLUSIONS

American democratic ideals provide the foundation for an educational system which values universal access and participation. The American Dream of social mobility bases itself on the notion of universal educational opportunity ... Education provides not only individual prosperity but also the social benefits of a competent work force and an informed electorate.¹⁶¹

This report examines the possible barriers that are acting to circumscribe access to higher education in the Ohio Appalachia region. These barriers are explored from the perspectives of high school students themselves, their parents, their school personnel, and a group of nontraditional students. Economic and demographic characteristics of the region are also analyzed.

The findings, in many ways, directly contradict prevailing stereotypes about Ohio Appalachians. Although there are undoubtedly cultural influences on the rate of higher education participation, the results of this study indicate that high school students in the region, rather than being anti-education, are more likely to be ill-informed about their options. The high school seniors surveyed display a high level of interest in continuing their education at college. They aspire to careers which would bring them higher socioeconomic status than their parents; the majority want to leave the region in search of greater prosperity. The seniors are motivated to continue their education by both economic and noneconomic concerns: getting a job, earning more money, learning things of interest, and getting a general education.

Although they recognize the value of higher education, the seniors' level of participation remains distressingly low. Participation in Ohio Appalachia is lower than in Ohio and the United States. Although 80 percent of seniors surveyed express the desire to go to college, only about 30 percent of that same group are likely to do so immediately after high school. High school students are somehow being obstructed from realizing their college aspirations.

The most important barriers to higher education mentioned by seniors, parents, and school personnel relate to financial concerns. Lack of finances and lack of information on financial aid are the barriers most frequently mentioned by all groups of survey respondents. This suggests that government financial aid programs have yet to achieve the goal of ensuring equal access.¹⁶²

¹⁶¹ Caldwell and Trainer, 1.

¹⁶² Equal access $\frac{1}{2}$ prevails if all individuals, regardless of differences in family background and parental wealth, face the same marginal cost of resources for college. ² Behrman, Pollak, and Taubman, 398.

Family income has repeatedly been found to be a reliable indicator of whether an individual will attend college. Ohio Appalachia exhibits family incomes well below averages for Ohio and the United States. This is of particular concern where students place a high degree of reliance on their parents as providers of financial support. The majority of families are, however, unable to save for their children's college education.

In addition to the real barrier that the cost of higher education represents, there is a perceptual barrier: seniors tend to overestimate the cost of attending college. This misperception is indicative of one of the major barriers to educational access--seniors lack accurate and pertinent information on college costs and financial aid availability.

Lack of information presents a problem in more than the area of financial concerns. A large number of seniors also feel they have insufficient information on college education programs and the postsecondary training they would need in order to enter the careers they desire. The challenge is therefore to identify the most effective manner in which to deliver the information that is presently lacking.

The groups most influential on the decision to attend college are--in descending order--parents, peers, and teachers. Almost all the high school students surveyed feel their parents to be supportive of higher education and have discussed the prospect of college with them. Although the overwhelming majority of parents also claim to be supportive of higher education, most have no higher education themselves. The level of education in Ohio Appalachia is below national and Ohio averages; most of the seniors, if they attend college, would therefore be first generation college students. Though parents may be able to provide some basic level of support to their children, their lack of personal experience may curtail the amount of practical help they can provide in the process of applying for college and seeking financial assistance. The process of applying for college and financial aid is complex, and can be confusing and intimidating even for those who have a college education themselves. Those who may most need the assistance--lower-income individuals whose parents have lower educational attainment--are probably the least well-equipped to complete this process, and therefore will suffer compared to those with greater resources and experience to draw upon.

Despite the seniors' feeling that their parents support their going to college, high school personnel regard lack of parental encouragement as a significant barrier to participation in higher education. High school personnel may have been making an implicit reference to the inability of parents with no experience of higher education to provide help with the college application process, rather than implying that parents do not support the idea of higher education.

Teachers and high school counselors are not regarded by the seniors as highly influential on the college-going decision. Schools are, however, well rated for promoting college, disseminating information on financial aid and costs of education, and information on careers which require postsecondary training. One must bear in mind, however, that the seniors have no reference point from which to compare the adequacy and accuracy of the information they are

receiving. The nontraditional students surveyed were a great deal less generous in their assessment of the information provided by their high schools on higher education and the skills needed in the labor market. Their subsequent experience in the labor market and at college affords them a perspective on the adequacy of the help they received in high school not available to seniors.

The majority of school personnel feel that they attempt to raise interest in higher education. Their responses suggest, however, that their attempts at higher education promotion may be directed at a select group of the student population. Educators appear to be segmenting their students according to whether they believe them capable of higher education. Students' perceptions of ability depend to a great extent on the feedback they receive from their teachers; if teachers do not acknowledge the potential in their students to succeed in college, seniors are less likely to feel themselves capable of doing so.

Only a small proportion of the seniors considered themselves to be of above-average intelligence; a quarter thought themselves not intelligent enough for college and a quarter felt that poor school grades would be a barrier. This apparent lack of self-esteem is an important barrier to higher education, although it may be more a matter of perceived inadequacies than actual inability. In general, however, the seniors feel educationally prepared for college.

It is possible that teachers' perceptions of the type of students going to college are out of date. A college education is no longer the preserve of a small intellectual elite; it is increasingly a requirement for success in many sectors of the labor market and therefore open to a much wider range of individuals.

High school personnel themselves feel that they are given insufficient information by area colleges on costs and financial aid; only a few feel that colleges provided enough information on entrance requirements and college expectations. Personnel, seniors, and their parents all have little faith in the effectiveness of college recruitment efforts.

The survey of nontraditional students affords a perspective on barriers that is not provided by the seniors; their responses confirm barriers identified both here and in prior research. Financial barriers remain of primary importance. Nontraditional students are less likely to have completed a college preparatory curriculum in high school and feel their educational preparation for college to be poor. After experience in the labor force, the nontraditional students are a great deal more critical of the help they received in school and the information they were given. However, they are also highly self-motivated to continue their education.

The barriers to educational access identified are remarkably consistent across all groups surveyed. Identifying the barriers to educational access is, however, only the beginning of the process of increasing educational access. Once a barrier is identified, the possibility exists to alleviate its effects. The barriers identified herein represent potential strategic points of intervention to increase equality of access. This report is therefore an important resource

document for policy makers seeking effective ways to address a problem of great importance to the Ohio Appalachia region.

The increasingly complex society in the United States requires ever higher levels of knowledge and skill from its citizens, both in the labor force and in everyday life. Whether seen from a moral perspective on equality of opportunity or the functional necessity of an adequately educated labor force, the low rate of participation in higher education in Ohio Appalachia is therefore of great concern.

SECTION VII

PROJECT DIRECTOR'S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The preceding section of this report presents conclusions derived from research conducted for this project. Section VII presents related and additional conclusions made by the project director as a result of the research and personal observations. The conclusions are followed by recommendations which should be considered in future efforts to increase participation in higher education in Ohio Appalachia.

CONCLUSIONS

1. A serious problem has been identified: graduates of Ohio Appalachia's public schools participate in higher education at alarmingly low rates. Approximately 31 percent of Ohio Appalachian students pursue higher education, compared to 41 percent for Ohio and 62 percent nationwide. Although there exists no totally accurate method of determining the proportion of Ohio Appalachian residents who participate in higher education, the evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the participation rate for the region is extremely low. The participation rate has increased during the past five years, but the gap between Ohio Appalachia's rate and the state average has remained constant. The lack of postsecondary training will continue to impact negatively the quality of life for residents of the region and will inhibit economic development and recovery in the region.
2. Higher education is available in Ohio Appalachia. Ohio has made significant investments in making colleges and universities geographically accessible--residents of the region are within a one-hour drive-of a college or university. The region's public colleges and universities provide a variety of quality programs--residents can pursue almost any career goal at an institution within the region.
3. The proportion of Ohio Appalachia residents participating in higher education can be increased. There is a growing recognition of the need for postsecondary training throughout the region, but there exist both real and perceived barriers to fulfilling that need. If appropriate activities are implemented, the access rate can be improved; if actions are not taken, the region will continue to experience high poverty levels and outmigration of its youth.
4. There is no single, short-term solution for the education problems in Ohio Appalachia. Public colleges and universities, along with the Ohio Board of Regents and the state legislature, have implemented numerous programs designed to make higher education more accessible. Despite the diversity and quality of those programs, the access rate in Ohio Appalachia remains well below sufficient levels. Much of the work to be done will involve efforts to change perceptions regarding higher education and to establish postsecondary training as a high priority throughout the region.

5. Institutions of higher education are the most appropriate vehicle for initiating and facilitating access improvement efforts. These institutions cannot significantly impact regional access rates by single-institution efforts, but a collaborative approach can produce positive results. While each institution must remain autonomous in providing access programs appropriate to its constituency and its unique situation, there are certain actions that can be implemented uniformly throughout the region.
6. Access programs and activities cannot be conducted in isolation. Access programs will necessarily be intertwined with other problems--at-risk children, poverty, student achievement, economic development. While most activities will involve partnerships with public schools, regional programs should also involve those agencies that list education as a "fringe" item--Community Action Organization, Appalachian Regional Commission, Governor's Office of Appalachia.
7. State funding is necessary for initiating access activities that will impact the entire Ohio Appalachia region. Although there have been several state-funded programs directed to aiding specific population groups (minorities, females), Ohio Appalachia's general population is underrepresented in higher education. It is unlikely that, in a period of shrinking budgets, Ohio Appalachia colleges and universities can maintain current access programs, let alone; initiate new efforts. The need to increase the proportion of Ohio Appalachia residents who participate in higher education must become a higher priority at the state level before coordinated access efforts can become a reality. An inventory of access programs at Ohio Appalachia colleges and universities indicates that there are numerous effective and innovative programs in existence and that those programs utilize varied sources of funding--federal, state, private, and institutional. (See appendix VI for program samples.) Unfortunately, many of those programs lack consistent funding, operate in relative isolation, and cannot impact the entire region.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations which follow are general in nature and are intended to provide a starting point for future efforts to improve educational attainment in Ohio Appalachia. The recommendations do not provide a definitive solution for the access problem because there is no simple solution. Solving it will require considerable time, effort, and collaboration, as well as, the involvement of colleges and universities, the Ohio Board of Regents, the state legislature, and local schools. The ultimate responsibility for solving the problem, however, falls to the residents of Ohio Appalachia. State government and the Ohio Board of Regents can provide facilities, programs, and financial assistance; colleges and universities can provide postsecondary training and information; schools can provide preparatory programs and enrollment assistance. It is the residents, however, who must decide whether higher education is worthwhile in their individual lives and in their region.

1. Develop a formal commitment to increase the proportion of Ohio Appalachia residents participating in higher education. The driving force behind any effort to increase access rates will be the public schools and institutions of higher education. The initial step of a plan to increase access to higher education should be to assure that the governing bodies of schools and colleges recognize the need for action and that they support the efforts of their institutions. Without support from their governing bodies, educational institutions are unlikely to address the access problem with any urgency. With support from those governing bodies, accessing higher education will become a higher priority in the education community. It is recommended that governing bodies of schools and colleges adopt a resolution supporting efforts to increase the educational attainment of residents of Ohio's Appalachian region.
2. Develop a collaborative approach to improving access rates in Ohio's Appalachian region. One conclusion derived from this project is that public colleges and universities can best serve as the lead agencies in developing and implementing actions that will increase participation in higher education. One observation from this project is that the colleges and universities can best serve the region if they maintain a unified approach. It is recommended that the present consortium remain intact for the purpose of implementing access activities throughout the region. While much of the work involved in improving access rates in Ohio Appalachia can be more efficiently accomplished with a uniform, regionwide approach, it must be recognized that each participating institution must retain its autonomy in order to develop and conduct access activities that are relevant to its constituency, its staff, and its mission.
3. The consortium of public colleges and universities should establish the "Appalachian Center for Higher Education." Recognizing that there is no single, quick solution for increasing Ohio Appalachia residents' participation in higher education, there is a need for a unifying organization to coordinate ongoing access activities in the region. The Center could facilitate access activities that are common to the entire region and could serve as a central source of data regarding the educational, economic, and demographic conditions of the region. An Appalachian Center for Higher Education would be the vehicle from which access improvement activities could evolve, and would be essential in assuring that access efforts be ongoing. Recognizing the need for a collaborative effort in addressing the access problem--as opposed to isolated efforts by individual institutions--it is essential that the center be established with modest but adequate state funding.
4. Higher education institutions should develop and implement a campaign designed to inform residents of Ohio's Appalachian counties of the need to increase the region's level of educational attainment. The purpose of this awareness campaign would be to focus attention on the access problem and to inform residents that improving access rates is essential to economic development. The campaign should utilize a variety of forums--parent groups, school groups, church groups, chambers of commerce, and other similar organizations. The campaign should be sponsored by higher education,

rather than by individual colleges or universities, and should use data from this document to illustrate the current levels of educational attainment in the region and the need for improvement. Campaign presentations should emphasize the quality of colleges and universities in the region and the efforts those institutions make to improve access rates.

Presentations should represent the entire consortium of Ohio Appalachia institutions and should be structured to relate to economic recovery issues. News media involvement during this awareness campaign will be valuable in establishing that colleges and universities are intensely involved in efforts to improve the region's economic future.

5. Higher education should develop and implement a program that would enable public school personnel to improve the promotion of higher education to students and parents.

Teachers should be provided inservice training regarding the emerging need for highly trained workers, the need for more Ohio Appalachians to pursue postsecondary training, and the types of occupations needed in the region. This inservice program should emphasize that dissemination of college information and occupational outlook must go beyond the top quartile of students who traditionally consider college attendance. Teachers must be made aware that the second and third quartiles of their students must give serious consideration to postsecondary training.

Teachers should also be provided inservice training regarding college opportunities in Ohio Appalachia, along with information relevant to academic requirements, admission procedures, and financial requirements. It should be a primary objective to assure that teachers are fully aware of the quality educational programs offered by colleges and universities in the region.

While this recommendation refers to teachers, it is not intended to exclude school counselors. Counselors are vitally important in the process of preparing students for college, but they cannot provide the services necessary for increasing participation rates. Counselors should remain the contact person for representatives from institutions of higher education, but it should be understood that teachers must be considered as an integral part of the counseling process.

6. The use of community resources in promoting higher education should be further developed. Community groups, businesses, and individuals can be very valuable in encouraging Ohio Appalachia residents to pursue postsecondary training. A part of the awareness campaign described in recommendation 4 should include activities that would involve various segments of local communities:

SCHOLARSHIPS. Funding and sponsorship of local scholarships could be established/expanded by numerous sources: Alumni, civic, and faculty groups, professional organizations, individuals, etc. Although local scholarships exist

throughout the region, there is a need to increase the number and amount. The scholarships, ranging from "seed" amounts to full tuition and fees, would not only provide financial aid to students but also exhibit that communities place high value on postsecondary training. A consortium of colleges/universities should assist communities throughout the region to establish or expand local scholarships.

FOUNDATION. In addition to establishing/expanding local scholarships throughout Ohio Appalachia, there should be an attempt to establish a foundation fund that would provide financial aid to residents pursuing postsecondary training. While it should be a long-term goal to develop a foundation that could serve the entire 29-county region it would be practical to begin a pilot project in one community or county. The purpose of the foundation would be to provide assurance to residents that postsecondary training will be financially attainable. The foundation should be initiated/sponsored by the consortium of colleges and universities, and the consortium should be committed to developing advising and counseling services along with financial aid.

MENTORS. Colleges/universities should increase the use of current college students returning to their communities and schools to promote higher education. The college students could provide information regarding college costs, academic preparation, and admission procedures. Graduates of Ohio Appalachia colleges who are currently employed should also be used to provide encouragement to potential students.

CHURCHES. A consortium of colleges/universities should develop a procedure for providing access information to churches throughout the region. Existing associations of clergy should be used to make presentations regarding the need for improved access. Church officials could be valuable in reaching parents of potential college students, and churches could serve as a point of distribution for financial aid information.

7. Colleges and universities should direct more access and recruitment efforts toward parents. Survey results indicate that parents are overwhelmingly the most influential group in the decision whether or not to attend college; therefore, parents need to be fully informed regarding their children's postsecondary options. Ideally, parents would receive information relevant to higher education while their children are in early elementary grades, which would help establish high aspirations and expectations for children early in their academic preparation.

Although communicating with the general parent population presents a major problem, there are existing mechanisms that can be used effectively: school-sponsored parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, churches, school district newsletters. Personal contact with parents should be the preferred method of contact, but printed material promoting higher education should be used as an alternative or supplement.

8. Colleges and universities in Ohio Appalachia need to intensify efforts to develop electronic

communications among themselves and with schools in the region. While some progress has been made in establishing a linkage process, much is yet to be accomplished. Electronic linkage between schools and colleges could be productive in accessing financial aid information, program requirements, admission procedures, etc. Electronic linkage would also be useful in developing a student tracking system.

9. A consortium of public colleges and universities needs to continue, and intensify, efforts to persuade Ohio government to make higher education financially accessible for Ohio Appalachia residents. This project revealed that lack of finances is the greatest barrier to participating in higher education and that tuition and fees at Ohio's public colleges and universities are among the highest in the nation. The high student cost for college had more negative impact in Ohio Appalachia, where the ability to pay college expenses is restricted by low family income. The national trend of more reliance on loans, rather than grants, will also negatively impact the region. Even with a college degree, Ohio Appalachians have little prospect for high-paying jobs in the region; therefore, they realize that they may not have the ability to repay loans.
10. Higher education needs to develop and implement programs designed to eliminate misconceptions among Ohio Appalachia residents. Some barriers to participating in higher education, according to project findings, are perceived rather than real barriers.

A significant portion of Ohio Appalachians perceive that college costs are greater than they really are. A part of any presentation associated with other project recommendations should be an explanation of actual college costs. Information regarding college costs must be directed not only toward prospective students, but also toward parents and school personnel.

Survey results indicate that significant numbers of Ohio Appalachia high school seniors feel they may not be intelligent enough for college or they may not "fit in" at college. Institutions of higher education need to collaborate with schools to develop/improve programs designed to build the self-image of the region's youth.