



Higher Education in Michigan: Overcoming Challenges to Expand Access

BY ALISA F. CUNNINGHAM, WENDY ERISMAN, PH.D., AND SHANNON M. LOONEY

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Higher Education in Michigan: Overcoming Challenges to Expand Access is a major new policy report from the **Institute for Higher Education Policy (IHEP)** that examines access to higher education in underserved regions of Michigan. This study focuses on specific concerns about postsecondary education access in three geographically diverse areas of the state: suburban Macomb County; the city of Saginaw; and six rural counties in the northeastern Lower Peninsula. The report provides a summary of findings regarding access to higher education in each of the three areas and proposes broad recommendations and policy alternatives to address the challenges of access to postsecondary degrees and institutions statewide.

While findings from the three regions varied due to differing demographic and geographic situations, some consistent patterns were found. Throughout the state, as manufacturing has declined as an employment leader, Michigan residents have found it increasingly difficult to succeed without a college degree. High unemployment rates, particularly in Saginaw and the rural northeastern counties, combined with the need to attract new industries to promote economic growth, highlight the importance of expanded access to postsecondary education for Michigan’s economic future.

The Michigan Higher Education Context

Access to higher education is a significant issue for the state and its communities. The benefits of investing in higher education are enormous, and the payoff from earning a baccalaureate degree is substantial for both the individual and the state.

- As of 2005, about a quarter of Michigan residents age 25 or older held a bachelor’s or graduate degree, slightly less than the national rate of 27 percent. Additionally, Michigan residents were more likely than residents of the United States as a whole to have only a high school diploma.
- In 2005, 9 percent of Michigan’s population was of the traditional age (18–24) to enroll in higher education. Of this group, 39 percent was enrolled in college or graduate school, slightly higher than the national percentage (35 percent). Michigan residents age 18–24 least likely to be enrolled in college were those who are low income, minority, and working full time.
- State policies concerning affirmative action are an important factor in Michigan’s college access discussion. Recently, the state passed Proposal 2, which eliminated the use of race and gender as factors in higher education admission procedures. Changes in college enrollment patterns for minority youth resulting from this legislation are already evident.

Macomb County

In terms of increasing college enrollment, policymakers in Macomb County need to consider the county’s insufficient access to baccalaureate

opportunities. Additionally, new policies need to focus on low-income Macomb residents, who have the hardest time accessing college. Increases in college enrollment and degree attainment for this group will help create a more educated workforce and a more prosperous Macomb county.

Saginaw

In addition to very low educational attainments for the city’s adult residents, Saginaw has low rates of postsecondary enrollment among traditional-age students, particularly among Black and Hispanic residents. As in other parts of Michigan, the Saginaw area has been affected by the economic move away from manufacturing. Postsecondary institutions in Saginaw and nearby should be able to help build a stronger workforce, but more attention must be paid to access challenges for low-income and minority residents.

Alpena and Surrounding Counties

Of all the areas discussed in this report, Alpena and the neighboring counties offer the biggest challenge to overcoming barriers to higher education access. Measures of higher education—both enrollment and attainment—in Alpena and the surrounding counties are considerably lower than in the state of Michigan as a whole. Clearly, multiple barriers exist for students in the Alpena area—some are specific to the rural location; others have to do with affordability, especially for the poorest students. For these challenges and barriers to be addressed, careful attention must be paid to the region’s geographic and economic status. Given the size of the region and its relatively dispersed population, it may be challenging to find leadership for new educational initiatives.

Recommendations

Among the key challenges identified in the research are a lack of easily accessible four-year institutions, particularly in Macomb County and the rural Lower Peninsula counties; inadequate partnerships and articulation agreements between two- and four-year colleges and universities; poor public transportation systems; the need to develop new and innovative programs to train workers in growth industries; concerns about the affordability of a college education; and, above all, the need to develop a college-going culture among Michigan residents. To address these concerns, the report makes the following broad recommendations:

Policy Option 1

Address college access issues at the state level.

- Establish a state higher education agency or statewide board of regents with the authority to design policies and initiatives to increase college enrollment and degree attainment rates across the state.
- Establish an initiative to address rural college access issues, with particular emphasis on involvement by rural community colleges.

Policy Option 2

Establish better working relationships among and new roles for the state's two- and four-year postsecondary institutions.

- Develop a uniform articulation agreement between public two- and four-year institutions.
- Allow selected community colleges in regions with insufficient higher education access to confer baccalaureate degrees in high-need fields.

Policy Option 3

Establish or expand healthcare and medical training programs to position Michigan as a leader in the healthcare industry.

Policy Option 4

Develop better public transportation systems, especially in areas where residents must travel to reach a postsecondary institution.

Policy Option 5

Invest in long-term financial support for college students and in programs that encourage college attendance.

- Support passage of proposed legislation to create "Promise Zones" in areas of the state with high youth poverty. In these zones, high school graduates would be guaranteed last-dollar scholarships to in-state institutions funded by a combination of public and private dollars.
- Create a statewide program that improves college financing literacy for families and students.

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W.K. KELLOGG FOUNDATION
One Michigan Avenue East
Battle Creek, MI 49017

269 968 1611 TELEPHONE
269 968 0413 FACSIMILE
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INSTITUTE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION POLICY
1320 19th Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036

202 861 8223 TELEPHONE
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