Summary of Higher Education Completion Conversations

December 2012

Background. In the summer of 2010, the Citizens League began a multi-phase project to develop and advance a set of recommendations aimed at enhancing higher education in Minnesota. In the first phase of this work, a committee of individuals, representing diverse perspectives, was assembled and charged with: (1) developing an objective picture of higher education in Minnesota and the challenges to be met and (2) a framework to guide the project's subsequent phases. From this Phase I effort, three key areas emerged as the central focus of the Citizens Leagues work:

> 1. 21st-century workers must possess the skills to "invent, adapt and *re*invent" – both on the job and in their careers overall.
> 2. Citizens need to have easy access to educational opportunities – both formal and informal – over the course of their lifetime.
> 3. Within the K-12 system (and beyond), students need help identifying, navigating and ultimately creating, career pathways.

In Phase II of this work, the Citizens League decided to use this framework (above) to focus in on two "real world" problems facing higher education – one of these problems being completion. When framing up the issue, Phase I committee members found low completion rates concerning, but other issues were more pressing. In choosing completion as one of the two projects in Phase II, the theory was that exploring barriers to completion might reveal information useful when advancing solutions to the Phase I framework. It was decided that a conversation with people who had stopped- or dropped-out of college could be a useful device to explore the framework – particularly the importance of lifelong learning, easy entrance/exit ramps to post-secondary and credentialing.

Completion Conversations. In the summer of 2012, the Citizens League partnered with Minnesota State College and Universities (MnSCU) to host and facilitate conversations with former MnSCU students who were on record as not having completed their degree program. During these conversations, participants were asked about their college experiences. The intent was to understand what went into the decision to stop- or drop-out and what, if any, implications this decision had on their lives. (See appendix for complete conversation protocol.)

MnSCU contacted these students by email and anyone interested in participating registered by contacting Citizens League staff. Two metro area in-person conversations were held in July 2012.

Participants who lived in Greater Minnesota were contacted by phone. Thirteen people participated in the in-person conversations; an additional eight were interviewed by phone. Participants in the in-person conversations received a $30 gift card; telephone participants received a $15 gift card.

The sample size was smaller than desired, but the participants were diverse in many respects: age, number of credits obtained and institutions attended. Participants had varied college experiences and the forces behind their decisions to stop- or drop-out were wide-ranging. They spoke of financial, academic, family and work impediments to post-secondary. Many said they felt dispassionate or confused about career pathways. For one participant health problems were paramount in her decision.

Findings. While participants' post-secondary experiences were relatively unique to the individual, several themes emerged from the discussions:

(1) **Post-secondary institutions aren't set up for adult learners.** Many participants felt education institutions are focused exclusively on 18-year-old, full-time, "traditional" students. Participants described experiences where they had to take time off of work to get enrollment or schedules sorted out, complicating their work schedules. In addition, participants felt the degree requirements and/or curricula were based on the assumption that students had little or no professional experience, which disregarded the skills they'd obtained in the workplace and resulted in courses participants viewed as redundant or of insignificant. Participants' preferences varied (i.e., some wanted more online, some wanted less online), implying institutions need to meet diverse preferences and needs.

   Some comments related to this finding:
   - "The system works for full-time students but we all don't live that kind of life. It's geared toward the full-time student."
   - "They wanted me to take 18 credits my first semester and that was unrealistic. They were setting us up to fail."
   - "I'm an online person, and I want to be able to get my degree online. Going in to campus is too hard to fit into your schedule. I want to do it on my own schedule."
   - "We're not 18-year-old kids. The hoops you have to jump through are absurd…Adults versus 18- and 19-year-olds have a completely different background. The hoops were arbitrary."
   - "Colleges need to employ specialty workers in their advising offices, not 19-year-old students with a cursory understanding of these arbitrary rules."
   - "Institutions don't have the niche specialty certifications I want. I would think about going back to school if they offered something competitive and useful."
   - "I found that schools were not accommodating to adult students with jobs. I detest the lack of human contact, and I resent that everything is online now. It felt like they were trying to weed me out. The fact is that there are a lot of students are 'nontraditional.' Why can't I test out of Freshman English 101? I'm a professional. I balance my own life; just help me get this certificate. The feeling that I took off work and still came away with nothing is frustrating."

(2) **High tuition and the fear of non-completion prevent re-enrollment.** Financial aid and student debt were recurring topics in the conversations. The overwhelming majority of the participants had student loan debt they found burdensome. There was a strong sense of injustice about student loans. Emotions ran high and language was "colorful" when discussing the student loan process or the amount of debt outstanding. They spoke of not re-enrolling because tuition is prohibitively high and they can't take on any more debt, particularly when they already did that once and have no degree to show for it.

Participants described the financial aid process as "time consuming" and difficult to navigate. Some said they found the FAFSA process so difficult they opted for private student loans, which were much easier to get, but also – as they found out later – much more expensive.

Some comments to this this finding:

- "I resent my student loans, I've paid so much and I have nothing to show for it."
- "If I could do it all over again, I would have been smarter about student loans. I took out more than I needed to."
- If I could do it all over again know what I know now, "I would have been better at student loan stuff."
- "No one tells you all the fine details. No one would go back to school if they knew the loan hassles you'd go through. Loans are a racket."
- "A college tuition bill is almost as painful to read as a medical bill. You have to go find multiple resources to even understand your bill."
- "I didn't finish the degree and I'm still paying for this."
- "The fact that I won't have paid off my loans [un]til I'm 50 is overwhelming."
- "FAFSA is a difficult process."
- "This math class I've paid for three times and failed three times. I'm working a second job to pay for student loans for a degree that I won't use."
- "FAFSA sucks. It doesn't take into account that a lot of people need aid that aren't eighteen years old."

(3) **Students receive insufficient assistance in identifying career pathways, including market demand for specific occupations.** Participants expressed frustration at lacking an understanding of career options, but also what schools and programs would suit their needs. They spoke of high school and college career centers that did not meet their needs. Some felt they had interests in many areas and could have used help focusing. Others needed more intensive assistance in identifying their aptitudes and interests.

Some comments related to this finding:

- "They should do a skills or interests inventory and then give you a list of careers that match your skills and interests, with salaries included."

- "I tried meeting with counselors but didn't get much guidance. They sent me to a huge catalog of careers but that didn't help me. It didn't explain what the career was about, it just said the name. I needed perspective of where careers could lead."
- "At my high school we had a college and career resource center with all these resources but no one ever used them or was forced to use them. I wish I had direction as a high school senior, like an aptitude test. High school did nothing for college preparation."
- "I have a lot of interests and if you don't know where you're going you'll never get there. It would have been nice to have someone to help me figure out my strengths and weaknesses and where I should go."
- "Without a clear picture of what I wanted to do with it, it didn't seem like there was a point. I didn't have focus."
- "Anything they do with pathways in high school isn't effective. It's too generic, but they do need more job shadowing at younger ages. As part of classes, pick three [jobs] and go shadow."

(4) Participants conveyed a sense of failure at not having obtained a degree. During the discussions, many participants expressed disappointment in themselves for not finishing their degree program. One participant broke down in tears, expressing how she felt she was a disappointment to her parents. Others spoke about the degree being the "gold standard" and, while some felt they had better skills than some of their degreed co-workers, they still wanted to get their degree. Every semester they didn't return was difficult for them and they resented things – employers, institutions or money – they felt got in the way of completion. One participant mentioned that her supervisor didn't know she didn't have a degree and she didn't want him to find out. (A side note: that same participant emailed after the conversation to say it had motivated her to talk to her supervisor and try to get time off to compete her degree.)

Some comments related to this finding:

- "I was miserable and hated [college] so I dropped out. I needed a new path. There is a lot of guilt and shame."
- "I would love to be able to check the box [that says 'bachelor's degree']…"
- "I've worked my way into a position where I'm working with people with bachelor's and master's [degrees], but if I lost this job I'd be in trouble."

What would help? Participants were presented with a list of seventeen possible programs or process improvements and asked to what degree they felt it would help students complete degree programs, based on their personal experience. The support for the items varied, but there were several that a majority of participants supported.

1. Lower tuitions costs/cut the cost: Over 70% indicated it would "help a lot"
2. Greater & easier access to scholarships: 65% indicated it would "help a lot"
3. Make the financial aid process easier (filling out the forms, etc.): 65% indicated it would "help a lot"

4. Make the application/enrollment process easier (help resolve issues related to prior enrollment; help me understand what I need to do; transferring credits, provide one-stop enrollment shop, etc.): 65% indicated it would "help a lot"
5. More flexibility in courses and class times (nights/weekends/online, blended programs): Almost 60% indicated it would "help a lot"

Likewise, a majority of participants *disfavored* the following two items:

6. Free or affordable child care: Nearly 55% indicated it "would not help at all"
7. An understanding of who would be in my classes (i.e., Will I be the oldest one in my class? The only veteran?, etc.) : 60% indicated it "would not help at all"

Next steps. The Citizens League will be incorporating these findings in their continuing work on higher education reform. The Citizens Leagues has engaged in three projects aimed at reforming higher education; two of these projects speak directly to these findings. For more information go to www.citizing.org/projects/highered

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Focus group protocol – 90 minutes

Opening [10 minutes]

Decription of Citizens League work.

There are a lot of organizations who have as one of their goals to increase college completion. We define college as any education beyond high school. Some of you may have heard of MnSCU's recent *Graduate Minnesota* initiative, which is reaching out to people who haven't completed and asking them to come back. We want to understand a bit more about why completion hasn't happened for you yet. The intent is to better understand what sorts of policies, programs or tools would help those who want to complete. Everyone here knows how hard it is to graduate college, so that's an experience we all understand and respect.

- What we'll do with the information; confidentiality
- Notetaker
- We'd like to have an open and honest discussion here tonight. For some of you, this might be a sensitive issue, for others it may not be. I'd ask that we all respect everyone's perspectives here tonight. I'm completely impartial, I'm just here to lead the discussion. I'm very interested in your experiences– there are no right answers to these questions.
- Confidential discussion – we ask that you don't discuss in detail what you hear here tonight. It's ok to talk in generalities, but don't attribute statements to anyone in particular.
- Are there any questions before we begin?

Questions [75 minutes]

(1) Let's get a feel for who is in the room. Many of you have not completed your degree program yet. How many of you have no yet gotten your college degree? How many of you have?

(2) Tell me broadly about your college experience. Where did you go? Why did you go to college? Why did you decide to go to that school? That program of study?
   a. Knowing what you know now what would have helped you select the best program or school?

(3) Did you feel prepared for college? Successful?

(4) You are on record with MNSCU as having nearly completed. Perhaps you received a degree or certificate elsewhere. If that is true, could you tell us what degree or certificate you've earned, and why you decided to make the switch?

(5) If you didn't complete, when did you first start to think you might not complete college? Talk about your decision to not finish--did you make a deliberate decision not to finish, or did it just kind of happen, perhaps with the expectation that you would finish? What sorts of challenges or experiences led you to this decision?

(6) If you intended to finish at a later time, what sorts of things kept you/are keeping you from doing so?

(7) Would you still like to finish? Why or why not?

(8) [Use of TurningPoint slides.] I'm going to show you a list of some things that may help people complete college. We'll go through these one by one. Vote on each one, using your clicker, selecting the option that reflects how much you think it would help to increase completion: would help a lot; would help a little; would help some, but not much; wouldn't help at all; don't know.

List:

   a. More help in picking a degree program that matches up with my interests
   b. More help in picking a institution that matches up with my interests
   c. Greater and easier access to loans
   d. Greater and easier access to grants & scholarships (Follow up for discussion: How much more money would you have needed? How close were you?)
   e. Lower tuition costs (cut the cost)
   f. Make the financial aid process (filling out the forms) easier
   g. Make the application/enrollment process easier (help resolve issues related to prior enrollment; help me understand what I need to do; provide one-stop enrollment shop, etc.)
   h. Ability to get credit for work and life experiences
   i. More information on what jobs are in demand (greater assurance I could get a good job in my degree area upon graduation)
   j. More flexibility in class times (weekends, evenings, online)
   k. More employer flexibility
   l. Free or affordable child care
   m. Help being a good student (free tutoring, help with coursework, learning good study habits)
   n. More hands-on, apprenticeship types of learning environments/ less classroom, seat-time.
   o. Free health care for students (even part-time) with affordable options for their families.
   p. An understanding of who would be in my classes (Will I be the oldest one in my class? Will I be the only veteran?)

Going through slides, note the reactions. Note where people make comments or how they react. Afterwards, ask the group for their general reactions to this list. What did you think of this list? Anything we missed/you'd like to add?

(9) What did you think the impact of not completing college would be? Has that been true?
(10) If you could do it all over again, are there any decisions you would make differently?

As discussion occurs, look for mention of where people turn for information; ask follow up questions about where they go for information on college, etc.

Closing [5 minutes]

- Thanks
- Next steps
- Any questions? Email or # to call if they have questions in the coming days.
- Payment of stipends

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Written survey/demographic information.

Demographic information was collected via a written survey.