

TRELLIS 360

Capstone Report: The Value of Higher Education



In 2023 Trellis hosted five in-person discussion sessions, covering five aspects of the value of higher education. Hosted at the Highland Campus of Austin Community College, topics covered included:

- Stakeholders in Value
- Using Diverse Data to Inform Value
- Why Underrepresented Voices Must be a Part of the Value Conversation
- How Higher Education is Valued by Industry
- The Value That Higher Education Infuses into Communities

Defining Value

EVENT HOST

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Common across our discussions was the value of higher education is unique to everyone.

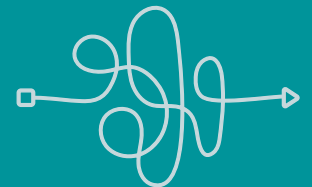
This deeply personal assessment of value was captured in the stories that our panelists articulated about themselves, or those close to them, regarding their experiences with higher education. Our conversations depicted varying reasons for pursuing higher education including economic mobility, personal fulfillment, intellectual curiosity, and societal expectation.

Define value through the lifelong critical thinking, problem-solving, and interpersonal communication skills they developed throughout a degree experience.

Depict value through a specific position or salary they are able to secure after completing their degree.

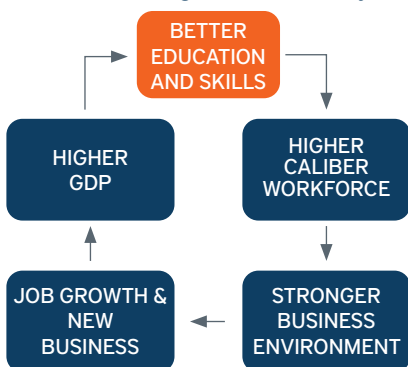
The value of higher education exists in being able to work just one job instead of two after completing a college degree.

As we assess value, it is essential to frame it through the perspective that the **postsecondary education journey is increasingly non-linear for individuals.**



Industries change rapidly and skills required to be successful evolve, which creates new on and off ramps for individuals pursuing postsecondary education. This leads to an evolving definition of value for both the learner and society. This fundamental shift combined with a national need to restore trust in higher education are essential perspectives for defining value. While economic models can provide a blunt and often baseline assessment of value, these realities present a strong case for a nuanced approach to defining value that was consistent among our panelists.

Virtuous Cycle of Education in the Regional Economy



With increased pressure to articulate the value of postsecondary education, **institutions should clearly state the skills obtainable through their credentialing pathways.**

Additionally, aligning these skills with regional workforce needs creates talent pipelines from institutions of higher education to local industry. This mapping of credentials to local workforce demands helps contextualize the value of education for learners at all stages of life. If more agile credentialing pathways can be developed to meet the needs of the modern learner, education will continue to provide access to social mobility.

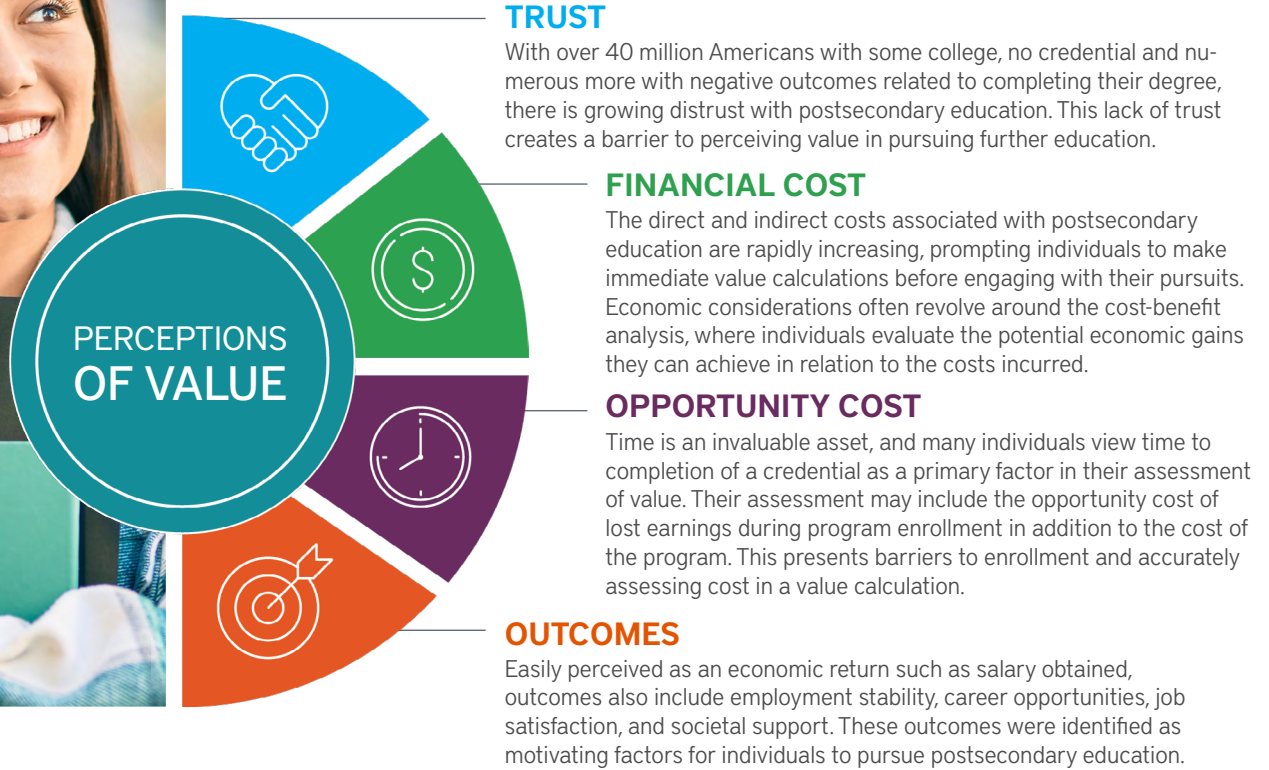


As AI, machine learning, and automation technologies improve, it will be critical that lifelong learning takes place to ensure that workers continue to build the skills that improve their productivity.

Elements of Value



Over the course of our conversations, we identified four core elements that influence how individuals perceive value.

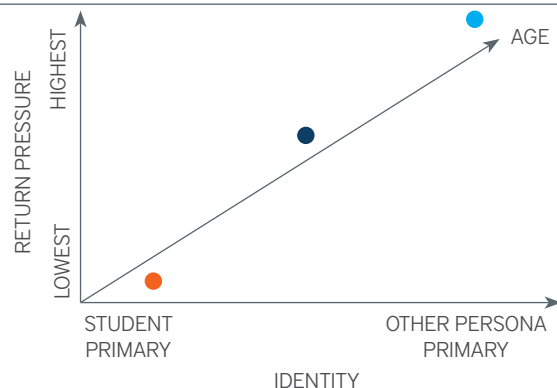


To demonstrate this, we present three fictional personas with generalizations about their expectations of the various elements of value:

LEARNER	DESCRIPTION
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Direct from High School 	This individual may have the most straightforward life circumstances and the most time to dedicate to postsecondary education. While they may maintain “student” as their first persona, they are still pressured to find income to support living expenses for themselves and often others.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early Career 	This student may have already had an interaction with the postsecondary system, is likely looking for economic stability, and has a desire to more quickly obtain a new role. There may be additional life pressures that push the persona of student to secondary or beyond and there is a strong sensitivity to return on investment.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mid Career 	This learner is likely looking for increased economic stability (earnings, career, or employment security) and has little time to wait for a return on an investment in training/education. This individual likely has numerous personas that appear before student and is focused on immediate post training outcomes.

Recognizing these personas has implications for how value is defined including:

- Learners lives become increasingly complex as they age, leading to student being a secondary persona
- As lives become more complex there is a higher expectation for a quicker return on investment
- There is also often less time to devote to education and a higher need for a path to economic stability



Credentials of Value

As we assess the value of credentials, a concern that some curriculum may not be deemed valuable was stated frequently. As a reaction to this, participants articulated numerous elements of value that are included below.

By recognizing these elements, higher education professionals can better assess the impact of curriculum and ensure it aligns with needs and aspirations of students and society at large.

ECONOMIC MOBILITY

The obtainment of a postsecondary degree often results in increased income, career opportunities, and employment stability. Economic mobility includes wealth creation, which often requires some education related debt to be incurred. The burden of this debt is felt differently by each learner. Considering a learner's starting point is important when evaluating the value of their credentials. Even if financially burdensome in the short term, investments in postsecondary credentials should benefit individuals and positively impact their families and communities.

EMPLOYMENT STABILITY

Jobs obtained after postsecondary education tend to offer greater employment stability, with lower rates of unemployment. This stability allows individuals to reduce the number of jobs or employers they have simultaneously, providing a more consistent income stream. Moreover, it enables them to plan for the future and make investments, such as pursuing additional education.

EDUCATIONAL PATHWAYS

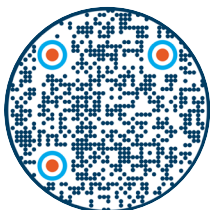
Individuals who obtain postsecondary certifications or degrees often enjoy better career pathways compared to those without such credentials. These pathways offer long-term financial growth and increased career satisfaction, paving the way for professional advancement and personal fulfillment.

SOCIETAL SUPPORT

While some credentials may not provide immediate economic returns, they hold significant societal value and contribute to fulfilling careers. Professions such as educators, specific medical providers, and social workers exemplify these essential roles that require credentials. Individuals pursuing these vocations may find increased satisfaction while making a positive impact on society.

SENSE OF ACHIEVEMENT

Completing a degree or credential represents a significant accomplishment for the individual and their broader community. This achievement not only boosts the confidence of the recipient but also serves as an inspiration for educational attainment within families and communities. Its value extends beyond personal growth and contributes to a collective sense of achievement and progress that can have generational impact.



Scan for upcoming events and webinars.

Moving Forward

Trellis is thankful for all who joined in this discussion throughout the past six months. We especially thank our panelists for challenging us, and our audience, to think deeply and holistically about the concept of value. We recognize this is only the beginning of the conversation.

As these conversations accelerate across the country, we hope that on-going conversations

- Engage those closest to the value calculation (students and potential students) in the discussion
- Bring industry into the conversation to align expectations and further de-risk pathways
- Metrics beyond economics are essential to accurately assess value from the start of a learner's journey
- Create more efficient pathways that recognize learning as individuals pursue education and provide portability in credit
- Improve opportunities for earning while learning for individuals

To evolve the education landscape, policy makers and practitioners should look to establish policies and programs that increase the likelihood of value for individuals including:

- Developing efficient ways to recognize learning as it is experienced
- Providing for portability in credit accumulation that transcends the traditional degree structure
- Developing new opportunities for individuals to earn while learning recognizing that many identify as wage earners before students
- Decreasing time to degree to accommodate those who need a faster route to economic outcomes
- Structuring programs to align with industry demand and recognize skill attainment



We are a strategic research and consulting firm dedicated to advancing postsecondary education and strengthening the workforce by delivering unparalleled insights into the modern learner experience, from application through graduation. With over 40 years' experience serving higher education institutions and helping students navigate complex processes, we have the knowledge, insight, and experience to help organizations turn their data into action and action into results.

Learn more at www.trellisstrategies.org.