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Contact:
Charles Leonard 618-303-9099
or David Yepsen 618-453-4009

Southern Illinois Voters Believe in College Education; Concerned about Funding, Access

A new poll finds a strong majority of southern Illinoisans believes many people in the state who are qualified for higher education don't have the opportunity to pursue it.

The survey, by the Paul Simon Public Policy Institute at Southern Illinois University, also shows people believe students from lower-income families have even less opportunity to get a higher education. While most believe their generation has had greater higher-education opportunities than their parents had, far fewer thought today's children would have the same educational opportunities that today's generation has.

"Education is the best stimulus package there is," said David Yepsen, director of the Institute. "For a hard pressed region like southern Illinois, it's good that people believe in quality higher education. That's the ticket to a better life for people – and a healthier economy for this region."

Yepsen said, "My grandmother back in Iowa – who taught in a one-room school – always told us to 'get a good education because nobody can take that away from you.' That was good advice from the Great Depression and it's good that people in southern Illinois still believe it. They need to be telling kids that today, too."

This is the fourth Southern Illinois Poll® the Simon Institute has conducted since 2010. Registered voters were randomly sampled across Southern Illinois—generally south of I-64, but excluding the Metro East suburbs. The sample of 403 voters has a margin for error of plus or minus 4.9 percentage points.

Even during a slow economic recovery that at times seems to have left the region behind, southern Illinoisans surveyed believe college education is a worthwhile, long-term investment for today's high school graduates. Most believe having quality higher education should be a top priority for Illinois, and that having top-quality higher education results in more economic development for the state.

“Anecdotally, we hear complaints around our region that higher education isn’t worth the money or the trouble it takes to get a college degree,” said Charlie Leonard, the Simon Institute visiting professor who supervised the poll. “We wanted to empirically test whether that opinion was widely held here in SIU’s backyard. We think it is good news that our neighbors in southern Illinois believe in the value of higher education—not just for individuals, but for the economic vitality of the region.”

The study also found that three-fourths of southern Illinoisans surveyed have a positive opinion of SIU.

On the other hand, southern Illinoisans seem to have significant concerns about higher education funding. Most thought higher education in Illinois is insufficiently funded. Opinion was roughly evenly split on whether the increased funding should come from state tax increases or higher tuition and fees.

Despite a positive view of Illinois higher education, and concern about whether it has enough funding or offers enough access, southern Illinoisans surveyed have doubts about whether the state’s four-year universities are concerned with controlling costs.

Community colleges compare favorably, both in cost control and quality of education in the first two years.

Positive highlights from the survey’s findings:

- Eight southern Illinois voters in ten (83.1 percent) said that achieving a college degree is more important today than it was for their parents’ generation.
- A telling statistic during times of economic hardship is that two-thirds (66.5 percent) of voters surveyed said a high school graduate should go to college to improve his or her long-term prospects, while fewer than two in ten (17.9 percent) said a high school graduate should take whatever job out of high school they can get.
- Three-fourths (75.7 percent) believe it is essential for the State of Illinois to have top-quality public colleges and universities. One in three (33.0 percent) overall said it should be a top priority, and another four in ten (42.7 percent) said it was a very important priority.
- A plurality of voters said the quality of public higher education in Illinois is excellent or good (43.7 percent), and another four in ten (39.0 percent) said it was average. The numbers are slightly better for public higher education “in your area of the state,” with about half (49.8 percent) saying it was excellent or good, and just over a third (34.7 percent) calling it average.
- Most (54.6 percent) thought states with top-quality public colleges and universities were more likely to attract economic development than states without.
- Three-fourths held a positive view of Southern Illinois University, with 54.1 percent having a favorable opinion and 22.1 percent holding a very favorable opinion of SIU.

Respondents also have good feelings toward college students: 27.5 percent view them very favorably, and 55.6 percent view them somewhat favorably.

Concerns over funding and access:

- Half (53.1 percent) of registered voters interviewed believed that Illinois public colleges and universities do not have enough funding to meet their needs. Opinion was fairly evenly divided over whether extra funding should come from state tax increases (32.3 percent) or higher tuition and fees (29.5 percent). One in ten (10.2 percent) volunteered that revenue was needed from both sources, and about one in seven (14.6 percent) said neither source was appropriate.
- Two-thirds (65.0 percent) of respondents said they thought there were many people in Illinois who are qualified to go to college but don't have the opportunity—twice as many as those (31.3 percent) who thought the majority of people qualified to go to college had the opportunity.
- Respondents were asked whether they thought students from low-income families had the same opportunities to go to college as others. The plurality (43.7 percent) thought low-income students had less opportunity to go to college, while a little over a third (37.2 percent) thought they had the same opportunity. Fewer still (15.9 percent) thought students from low-income families had more opportunities than others to go to college.
- Southern Illinois voters surveyed overwhelmingly believe (77.7 percent) that there are greater opportunities to achieve a college education today than in their parents' generation. Far fewer (56.1 percent) believe that when today's children reach college age, their opportunities will be greater than those of the current generation.

Four-year vs. two year schools:

- Just over a quarter (27.3 percent) thought four-year colleges and universities work hard to keep the price of a college education down. Twice as many thought four-year institutions “raise prices whenever they can to bring in more money.”
- The results were flipped for two-year community colleges. Seven in ten (71.5 percent) thought two-year institutions worked hard to keep costs down, while only two in ten (20.1 percent) thought they raised prices whenever they can.
- Six in ten (63.5 percent) strongly agreed and another one-fifth (19.9 percent) somewhat agreed that students at two-year colleges can learn as much as they would in the first two years at a four-year school.

The poll of 403 registered voters covered the 18 southernmost counties in Illinois: Alexander, Franklin, Gallatin, Hamilton, Hardin, Jackson, Jefferson, Johnson, Massac, Perry, Pope, Pulaski, Randolph, Saline, Union, Washington, White, and Williamson. Live phone interviews were conducted September 20 through October 2. The sample has a margin for error of 4.9 percent at the 95 percent confidence level. This means that if we conducted the survey 100 times, in 95 of those instances, the result would be within plus

or minus 4.9 percentage points from the results obtained here. The sample included 30 percent cell phone interviews.

Telephone interviews were conducted by Customer Research International of San Marcos, Texas. It reports no Illinois political figures as clients. The poll was paid for with non-state dollars using proceeds from the Institute's endowment fund.

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Southern Illinois Poll Fall 2013 – Higher Education Questions

Table 1 – SIU Favorability

“We would like to know your views of various industries and occupational groups in our area. For each one that I read, please tell me whether you have a very favorable attitude, favorable, unfavorable, or very unfavorable attitude toward that group. If you don’t have an opinion either way, just tell me that. First is (rotate)

“Southern Illinois University”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Very favorable	22.1%
Favorable	54.1%
Unfavorable	8.7%
Very unfavorable	4.2%
No opinion	7.9%
Other/Don’t know	3.0%

Table 2 – Quality of Public Higher Education

Respondents were asked about the quality of public higher education, in general, in the State of Illinois. They then were asked about the quality of public higher education “in your area or part of the state.”

<u>Response</u>	<u>In Illinois</u>	<u>In Your Area</u>
Excellent	10.4%	10.1%
Good	33.3%	39.7%
Average	39.0%	34.7%
Below average	7.2%	7.4%
Poor	5.7%	5.7%
Other/Don’t know	3.2%	2.2%

Table 3 – Public Higher Education Funding

“Overall, do you think the funding for public universities and colleges in Illinois is enough to meet their needs or not enough to meet their needs?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Enough	35.2%
Not enough	53.3%
Other/Don't know	11.4%

“If you came to believe increased funding for public universities and colleges in Illinois were necessary, should it come from” (*Rotate*)

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
State tax increases	32.3%
Tuition and fee increases	29.5%
Both (VOL)	10.2%
Neither (VOL)	14.6%
Other/Don't know	13.4%

Table 4 – Importance of Quality Higher Education

“How important would you say it is for Illinois to have *top quality* public universities and colleges? Would you say this is a . . .”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Top priority	33.0%
Very important but lower priority	42.7%
A somewhat important priority	21.3%
Not too important a priority	1.7%
(VOL) Not important at all	0.3%
Other/Don't know	1.0%

“Do you think states with top-quality public universities and colleges are more likely to attract economic development, less likely to attract economic development, or doesn't it make much difference one way or the other?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
More likely	54.6%
Less likely	1.5%
Doesn't make much difference	41.4%
Other/Don't know	2.5%

“Would you say that achieving a college degree is more or less important today than it was for your parents' generation?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
More important	83.1%
Less important	11.9%
Equally important (VOL)	3.7%
Other/Don't know	1.2%

Table 5 – Access to Higher Education

“Do you believe that currently, in Illinois, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don’t have the opportunity to do so?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Vast majority have the opportunity	31.3%
Many who don’t have the opportunity	65.0%
Other/Don’t know	3.7%

“Now I’d like to know if you think qualified students from low-income families—regardless of ethnic background—have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Less opportunity	43.7%
More opportunity	15.9%
About the same opportunity	37.2%
Other/Don’t know	3.2%

“And, would you say there are greater or fewer opportunities to achieve a college education today than there were for your parents’ generation?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Greater opportunities	77.7%
Fewer opportunities	17.9%
About the same opportunities (VOL)	3.2%
Other/Don’t know	1.2%

“When today’s children are of college age, do you think they will have greater or fewer opportunities to attend college than you did?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Greater opportunities	56.1%
Fewer opportunities	30.3%
About the same opportunities (VOL)	7.2%
Other/Don’t know	6.5%

Table 6 – Choose Higher Education or Employment

“Which statement comes closer to your own view, that (ROTATE) . . .”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
High school graduates should go on to college because they’ll have better job prospects in the long run	66.5%
--OR--	
High school graduates should take any decent job offer they get, because there are so many unemployed people already	17.9%
Other/Don’t know	15.6%

Table 7 – Cost and Quality – Two-year vs. Four-Year Schools

“Do you think that four-year colleges and universities work hard to keep the price of college education down, or that they raise prices whenever they can to bring in more money?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Work to keep the price down	27.3%
Raise prices whenever they can	58.6%
Other/Don’t know	14.1%

“And what about two-year community colleges? Do you think community colleges work hard to keep the price of college education down, or that they raise prices whenever they can to bring in more money?”

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Work to keep the price down	71.5%
Raise prices whenever they can	20.1%
Other/Don’t know	8.4%

“Do you agree or disagree that students at two-year community colleges can learn just as much as they would in their first two years in a four-year college or university?” (IF AGREE/DISAGREE: Do you strongly or somewhat AGREE/DISAGREE?)

<u>Response</u>	<u>Percent Responding</u>
Strongly agree	63.5%
Somewhat agree	19.9%
Somewhat disagree	5.7%
Strongly disagree	4.7%
Other/Don’t know	6.2%