

Value of Postsecondary Degree Higher Among Blacks and Hispanics

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ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

by Jamaal Abdul-Alim

When it comes to increasing the number of Americans with a college degree, the vast majority of Americans agree that the goal is important and that a postsecondary degree will be more important in the future to get a good job, a new Gallup-Lumina Foundation study has found.

However, in taking a more granular look at the situation through the lens of demographics, the study found that those favorable views toward the value of a college degree or credential are more common among Blacks and Hispanics than they are among Whites.



More specifically, 72 and 73 percent of Hispanics and Blacks, respectively, say it is “very important” to increase the proportion of Americans with a degree or professional certificate beyond high schools, whereas just 56 percent of Whites held such a view.

Further, whereas 78 and 74 percent of Hispanics and Blacks say having a postsecondary degree will be “more important in the future to get a good job,” just 67 percent of Whites believe that is the case.

So what’s the reason behind the divergence along racial lines? Could it be that Whites deem a college education as less crucial to their futures than Hispanics and Blacks do because more Whites have actually attained a postsecondary degree—44 percent—and have thus tested the theory on the value of a college degree and found it not to be true? Or could it be that Whites have more social capital and networking opportunities that make a college degree less important?

With respect to Hispanics and Blacks, could it be that more deem a college degree as vital to their success because fewer—20 and 28 percent, respectively—have actually attained a postsecondary degree and thus have been less able to test the theory about its value?

Or could it be that non-Whites value a college degree more because, as recent research has found, higher levels of education are required to attain the same employment prospects as less educated Whites?

Jamie Merisotis, president and CEO of Lumina Foundation, said the different attainment rates among

ethnic groups may explain the varying rates at which they deem a college education as important but that an even more granular look at the situation would be needed to understand more precisely as to why.

“It’s hard to explain without breaking down what’s happening within the White population to see what their actual attainment level is and their experience,” Merisotis said in response to those question from *Diverse* at a recent panel discussion in Washington, D.C., to discuss the study, formally known as the “2014 Gallup-Lumina Foundation Study of The American Public’s Opinion on Higher Education: Postsecondary Education Aspirations and Barriers.”

“But my view is Americans want better for themselves. All Americans do,” Merisotis said, adding that the Gallup-Lumina poll results consistently show that Americans are saying the path to a better life is through education.

Cheryl Hyman, Chancellor at the City Colleges of Chicago, said: “From what I see, I see a group of minorities that their only hope is education. However, no one has made that path easy for them or showed them what the right path is to obtain it.”

She also spoke of a failure of institutions of higher education to “retool” and “retrain” individuals in order to close skills gaps among ethnic groups.

Eduardo Padron, president of Miami Dade College, levied similar criticism.

“I believe our industry still hasn’t arrived in the twenty-first century. I feel we have failed to understand the nature of the twenty-first century innovation and knowledge economy,” Padron said, adding that there were a few “notable exceptions.” “The fact of the matter is we really need to be training the students for the jobs that are not here today.”

The Gallup-Lumina study turned up a number of differences in perceptions of higher education and its worth among ethnic groups.

The findings include:

- 84 percent of Hispanics and 76 percent of Blacks agree or strongly agree that having a professional certificate or degree beyond high school is “essential for getting a good job,” compared to 64 percent of Whites.
- 80 percent of Blacks and 83 percent of Hispanics “agree or strongly agree that a college degree or professional certificate leads to a better quality of life,” compared to 71 percent of Whites.
- 86 percent of Hispanics and 84 percent of Blacks believe that a good job is “essential to having a high quality of life” versus 76 percent of Whites.

The full report can be found here: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/182462/postsecondary-education-aspirations-barriers.aspx>

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