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Understanding the Value of Education: A Critical Component of a Major Social Change Effort

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Receiving the benefits of postsecondary education is important to nations throughout the world. A more educated citizenry results in, among other things, less crime and poverty, increased physical and mental health of individuals, and greater economic growth (e.g., American Human Development Project, 2009; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005). These benefits are felt at all levels of society (i.e., individual, community, and national) and essentially define the social and economic structure of a nation. According to a Lumina Foundation (2009) report “college-attainment rates are rising in almost every industrialized or post-industrial country in the world, except the U.S.” (p.1). The graduation rate in the United States has been steady at 39% for the past four decades while some nations now have more than 50% of their young adults ages 24-34 obtaining college degrees (Lumina Foundation, 2009). This would be relatively insignificant if the U.S. was showing marked improvement in degree obtainment, but it is not. In fact, while other nations continue to improve their attainment rates, the U.S. remains stagnant (Lumina Foundation, 2009). In order to advance the competitiveness in the global economy and to attain at minimum, parity with other countries throughout the world, a major social change effort needs to be made.

Practitioners and researchers of human resource development (HRD) are strategically positioned to assist with this major social change effort. McLean and McLean (2001) define

HRD as “any process or activity that, either initially or over the long term, has the potential to develop...work-based knowledge, expertise, productivity and satisfaction, whether for personal or group/team gain, or for the benefit of an organization, community, nation, or, ultimately, the whole of humanity” (p. 10). Hence, HRD is not a field focused only on workplaces and businesses; with its emphasis on learning, development, and change, HRD expertise can be used to assist in developing and improving communities, states, and even nations. This would include efforts within the U.S., or any of its states, to inspire and encourage more youth and adults to attend and graduate from college.

Although there are many reasons individuals should earn college and university degrees, economic and financial motives are some of the strongest. These are also top motivations for communities, including the state of Utah, to work toward a more educated citizenry. A recent report released by the Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010) outlined the educational demands required by each U.S. state to fulfill their growing employment needs. As stated in this report, Utah will need 66% of its adult population with certificates or degrees of postsecondary education by 2018, and 55% of this group will need at least an associate degree. Currently, Utah is below the national average for college attainment with only 36% of its young adults receiving college certificates or degrees (Lumina Foundation, 2009). Utah leaders want this to change.

Prodigious concern grew out of the statistical disparity between Utah women and their national counterparts, who make up 57% of college students nationwide while Utah women make up only 49% of college students within their state (Madsen, Hanewicz, Thackeray, & King, 2010). In fact, compared to all other states, Utah ranks last in terms of the percentage of college students who are female (Madsen et al., 2010). Although the percentage of the women who are education in Utah has been above the national average for over a century, in the last decades Utah has fallen behind. In an effort to address these declining attainment

levels, a team of researchers conducted an extensive study to discover why more young women in Utah are not attending and graduating from college. An important component of this larger study was to determine what value and perceived benefits the participants associated with higher education. In fact, an early informal hypothesis of this project was that one of the reasons young women were not choosing to attend and complete college was that they did not understand the broad value of a college education. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to report the results of the study specific to young women's perception and understanding of the value of higher education and the relationship between their decision to attend and complete college. The overarching research question was as follows: What value and benefits do young female Utahans believe are associated with earning college degrees, particularly for women?

Importantly, although economic growth is an aspect of national stability, it is only one piece of the greater issue. There is extensive literature supporting the benefits individuals receive by obtaining a college degree in terms of health and well being, parenting, economic prosperity, civic and community engagement, intellectual/cognitive welfare, and self-development (e.g., American Human Development Project, 2009; Baum, & Ma, 2007; Boardman, Powers, Padilla, & Hummer, 2002, May; Madsen, & Hanewicz, 2011; Meara, Richards, & Cutler, 2008; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 2005; Thomson Healthcare, 2007). The benefits are readily available, but are currently being neglected by many Utah women and those who influence them. This is troubling on innumerable levels and will require the effort and influence of many individuals and organizations, including HRD researchers and practitioners, to create the change necessary for significant improvement. If there is a link between college attendance and understanding the comprehensive benefits of higher education, there would be evidence to support future interventions focused on educating

individuals, families, and communities on these benefits within a host of settings (e.g., homes, schools, churches, colleges/universities, and workplaces).

The theory of reasoned action as described by Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) was used as the theoretical framework for this study. However, the researchers developed a relatively new approach for its background characteristics model. The research team created the model based on previous exploration of attitudes, beliefs, intentions, and behaviors. Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) maintained that predicting behavior can be done by analyzing the attitude toward a particular behavior, and that to influence those attitudes, beliefs (behavioral and normative) must be addressed and/or adjusted. They noted the significant impact of subjective norms (i.e., various forms of social pressure perceived by an individual) on reasoned action. This theory gave rise to the in-depth protocol used to investigate the influential factors and underlying motivations, or lack thereof, of women in Utah who chose not to obtain college degrees. The resulting model recognizes the college attendance decision as the climactic behavioral outcome. The model identifies and evaluates the ways in which psychological and sociological norms, beliefs, and values collectively influence and ultimately determine the aspirations of young women in terms of their college decision. The primary component of the model that relates to this paper includes individual values, the influence of others on these values, and how these values influence college-related attitudes, beliefs, intentions and behaviors.

The researchers used a complex mixed-method qualitative research approach to collect data for this study. The instrument and the interview-like situations it produced included elements of the following approaches: phenomenology, narrative, and case study. Miles and Huberman (1994) and Denzin and Lincoln (1994) suggest approaches like these are beneficial in obtaining insights and gaining intrinsic understanding into a specific phenomenon. Creswell (1998) actually suggests that up to ten individuals be used as a sample

size in this type of study which consists of long interview protocols, criterion sampling, and thematic analysis. This in-depth study had 245 participants, which far exceeds the generally accepted sample size.

The in-depth interview-like situations were conducted through the Interactive Dialogue System (IDS). Using the IDS software program allowed each participant to log into a secure system (a participant code was needed to access the questionnaire) and proceed through a self-paced, structured online protocol. The instrument consisted of open- and close-ended items, which contained approximately 100 questions, depending on the skip logic. The Interactive Dialogue System, developed by J. Patrick Garrett of Meraquest, Incorporated (Version 3), has traditionally been used in political polling and market research. Its use for educational research, therefore, had not been previously documented. The IDS program, however, provided an anonymous platform for structured online interactions. These interactions could be done 1) in a guided focus group setting with each participant on her own laptop (the typical IDS collection method), or 2) in a self-paced format, which allowed participants to progress at their own speed and at a location of their choice. The original design was to collect all data through facilitated on-site focus group settings; however, after sessions at eight locations throughout Utah the sample size was still too small. Researchers continued collecting data but only through the self-paced online format. The online delivery allowed participants from all over the state to be involved, permitted them to participate at a time that was most convenient, and allowed them to take as little or as long as they wanted on each individual question. Transcribing the interviews was not needed.

This study yielded many findings that are too extensive to be included in this abstract. However, a more complete list of findings will be discussed in the conference presentation and the full paper that will be written and available at the 2012 AHRD conference as well. One of the initial findings, however, includes a lack of understanding for the broader value of

education. This was manifested by participants who claimed that education is “very important” yet failed to express a feeling of urgency, which explains the actuality of low attainment rates. While young women in Utah recognize the more pragmatic benefits of higher education, they fail to perceive the life-long advantages that could contribute to their health and wellbeing, and therefore, their overall productivity throughout life.

The paper will conclude with a discussion of study limitations and some in-depth implications for HRD scholars and practitioners. Although there are many limitations for this type of research methodology, a number of areas should be considered more closely:

- The lack of participants from minority populations
- The lack of participants from religions other than LDS/Mormon
- The combination of various recruiting strategies to find enough participants (not a random sample across Utah)
- Perceptions from one point in time (participants addressed questions related to the past, present, and future all within a two-hour time frame)
- Many of the statistics came from careful coding of qualitative data

Of course, causality is difficult to demonstrate in this type of research, so caution should be used in generalizing the results of this research study to the female population at large.

However, this type of exploratory data can be useful due to the in-depth protocol and rich data provided in a mixed method qualitative study such as this.

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