

February 1999

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Nebraskans' Educational Needs, Access to Technology and Perceptions of the University of Nebraska

Furgason, J. W. and Rockwell, S. K.¹

**Summary
February 1999**

Introduction

The Nebraska Annual Social Indicators Surveys (NASIS) produce current, topical information about Nebraskans and monitor change in quality of life.

The 1997 NASIS included questions that addressed four broad areas of public input:

- Perceptions of higher education institutions and educational needs
- Perceptions of the University of Nebraska and its programs
- Awareness and perceptions of University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension and its programs
- Use of electronic and communications technology in the home and workplace

Data were collected via telephone surveys. Data addressing perceptions about higher education were collected November 1997 through January 1998 from a random sample of 1827 households. Data about the use of electronic and communication technology were collected June 1998 through August 1998 from a new sample of 1800 households. Data were weighted so the responses represent Nebraskans according to age, sex, and geographic region.

Highlights of the Data

Perceptions of Higher Education Institutions and Educational Needs

Nationally, 73% of the public rate four-year colleges and universities as doing a good to excellent job in meeting their educational needs. In Nebraska, the public's ratings are even higher for the University of Nebraska system (92%), private colleges and universi-

ties (92%), and State colleges (89%). In addition, two-year or community colleges are also doing well in meeting needs as judged by 87% of Nebraskans.

Although the people give higher education institutions in Nebraska good marks on meeting their needs, 88% also believe it is important or very important for colleges and universities to develop more courses using distance learning methods such as satellite, television, and video cassettes.

Four out of five Nebraskans (the same percentage as found nationally) feel that it is now more important than it was ten years ago to obtain a college degree to be successful in their jobs or careers. Of those employed full or part-time, 80% believe that getting additional training or education is important for success in their work; 50% reported that there was a minimum educational requirement for their current job, with one-third of this group noting that the requirement was a four-year college degree or post-graduate degree. Nearly half the employed respondents indicated they have pursued additional job-related training or education in the past three years. About 30% work for employers who required them to get additional job-related education or training.

Almost three-fourths of the workers who are required to get additional education or training reported that their employers offer tuition assistance programs that generally cover all or part of the tuition. Three out of four employee tuition programs include courses for college credit, while four out of five provide support for non-credit courses and workshops.

Two thirds of those employed have changed careers at least once since they began working; slightly more than half have changed at least three times. At the national level, the frequency of career change was nearly identical to that reported in Nebraska. Two out of every five Nebraska workers expected to change careers in the future.

About half of the respondents indicated they are likely to enroll in a course for college credit in the next three years. Of this group of likely enrollees, half would choose a community college and one third would choose a four-year state university like the University of Nebraska.

College course accessibility was judged fairly high as nearly all Metro (residents of Lincoln and Omaha) and 85% of the Non-Metro respondents reported that courses were available in the county where they lived.

Over the past three years the most common ways the respondents obtained education or training for job skills or professional development were:

60% Attending a short course, seminar, workshop

47% Attending a conference

42% Watching a video

39% Attending a non-credit college class

29% Attending a college class for credit

28% Using a CD-ROM or computer disk tutorial

24% Using or accessing information off the Internet

Perceptions of the University of Nebraska

Overall, a large majority (86-95%) of Nebraskans agree that University programs are:

- Benefitting the state economically and providing a good return on tax dollars invested
- Providing leadership in identifying and adapting to future needs
- Providing an accessible education
- Providing quality teaching and appropriate off-campus education and assistance to individuals, communities, and business/industry

However, it should be noted that slightly fewer respondents (78%) agreed that courses and programs are affordable for Nebraska residents.

The core missions of the university, undergraduate teaching, graduate teaching, teaching older (non-traditional) students, conducting off-campus extension educational programs and doing research were all seen as important by the respondents. However, the percentage who rated the missions as *very important* ranged from 4-10 percentage points lower in Nebraska than for the nation. Despite this tendency, Nebraskans would distribute \$100 of taxpayer money in about the same way as reported nationally, with 47% going to teaching students on campus, 28% for off-campus education and assistance, and 25% for doing research.

In 1993 the University of Nebraska Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) queried the public to learn what aspects of the economy were considered elements of a definition of the term *agriculture*. A comparison of the 1993 survey with similar data collected in 1997 shows that the public's definition of agriculture has narrowed somewhat over the past four years. Production of crops and livestock, and processing of farm/ranch products for consumer consumption continue to be widely accepted elements defining agriculture. However, the number of Nebraskans who include distribution of processed products to the consumer under their definition of agriculture has declined 14 percentage points (from 77% to 63%). Similarly, the proportion of the public who consider the safe use of food by consumers a part of agriculture declined 13 percentage points (from 72% to 59%).

Nationally, and in Nebraska, the public overwhelmingly supports continued or increased public funding for key university programs. In Nebraska, these include IANR programs that address:

- Natural resources and environment
- Nutrition, diet, and health
- 4-H and youth development
- Sustaining families and communities

Moreover, two out of three Nebraskans believe that *more* public funds should be spent on sustaining strong families.

Perceptions of University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension

Overall awareness of Cooperative Extension or any of its programs was reported by 92% of the respondents, which is higher than found at the national level (85%). Nebraskans tended to be more aware of Extension agriculture and natural resource programs and 4-H than was true for the nation as a whole. Statewide awareness of Extension community development programs matched that found on the national level, but awareness of Extension family programs was lower for Nebraska than the nation. Slightly more than one out of five Nebraskans noted they had used Cooperative Extension in the past year, almost three times the national average.

Use of Electronic and Communications Technology in the Home and Workplace

Technologies present in the majority of Nebraskans' homes include:

95% Touch-tone telephone

92% VCR

73% Cable TV

71% Telephone answering machine

52% Personal computer

Home computer use is higher in Nebraska than for the nation, and about one out of four Nebraskans has online Internet access from home. In addition, 58% report using a computer at work, which is comparable to national usage.

Cooperative Extension
Agricultural Research Division
Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
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¹Extension Assistant and Extension Specialist in Program Evaluation. A complete report of the 1997-98 results has been published by the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in the form of a data book titled *Nebraskans' Educational Needs, Access to Technology and Perceptions of the University of Nebraska* (MP72). Copies are available upon request from:

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