

# Higher Education Attainment

### RESEARCH SUMMARY

NO. 22 | MARCH 19, 2024

#### INTRODUCTION

During the fall of 2023, Utah Women & Leadership Project (UWLP) researchers conducted a statewide study to establish a baseline for public perceptions related to the awareness, understanding, and attitudes about challenges that Utah women and girls face (see [Background & Methods](#) for details). The study was created to support the work of 18 areas of focus (spokes) within the movement called [A Bolder Way Forward](#), which is dedicated to helping more Utah girls and women thrive. One of the 18 areas of focus is higher education attainment, and this summary shares findings that illuminate present circumstances and establishes a baseline to track progress.

#### BACKGROUND

Vast [research](#) confirms that completing postsecondary certificates and degrees are linked to positive outcomes. Research through the years, focused mostly on bachelor and graduate degree attainment, links higher education with not only better jobs, lower unemployment, and more stability, but also with benefits in health and wellbeing, civic and community engagement, parenting, self-development, intellectual and cognitive development, and societal outcomes. Even though slightly more women than men are now graduating at the bachelor's degree level, this is not the case for women of color. And, Utah has the [widest gap](#) in the nation between men and women with graduate degrees. Exploring Utahns' understanding and perceptions may guide strategies for improvement.

#### RESEARCH FINDINGS

Participants responded to each survey item using a 7-point Likert scale (1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=somewhat disagree, 4=neither disagree nor agree, 5=somewhat agree, 6=agree, and 7=strongly agree). For Sample 1 (non-probability), 2,666 Utahns responded to these four questions, and for Sample 2 (representative), there were 650 participants (Total=3,316).

**1. Value:** The first survey item was "In addition to improving economic opportunity, higher education is also important for intellectual growth, personal development, and life-long societal contributions." The statistical mean was 6.31 (SD 1.10) for the non-probability sample and 5.63 (SD 1.41) for the representative sample. In total, 2,629 (79.3%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed with this statement, while another 11.7% somewhat agreed. Only 9.0% of either sample disagreed. See the demographic findings below.

##### DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

*\*Gender:* Women's agreement levels were higher than men's (6.22 and 5.82, resp.).

*\*Age:* All agreed, but those who were in the 55–64 age range had higher agreement.

*\*Education:* The higher the degree, the more the agreement.

*Marital Status:* Agreement levels were similar in all status categories.

*\*Income:* The higher the income level, the stronger the agreement.

*Children:* There were no significant differences between parents and non-parents, and there were no significant differences among parents based on number and ages of children.

*\*Race & Ethnicity:* Asian, White, and Hispanic respondents had the highest agreement levels.

*\*Religion:* Latter-day Saints and atheists had the highest agreement and Catholics the lowest. The "very active" category had the highest agreement.

*\*Employment:* Full-time students had the strongest the agreement.

*Residency:* There were no significant differences among categories.

*\*Counties:* Cache, Davis, Summit/Wasatch counties agreed the strongest, while the 10 rural eastern counties, along with Weber, Box Elder agreed the least.

**2. Inclusion:** The second survey item was "Inclusive environments are critical to cultivating cultures of belonging in higher education." The statistical mean was 6.40 (SD 1.10) for the non-probability sample and 5.37 (SD 1.45) for the representative sample, which reflects a significant difference between the samples. In the representative sample, only 25.8% strongly agreed, while 64.9% of the non-probability sample strongly agreed. Notably, only 10.7% of the combined sample disagreed. See the combined demographic findings below.

##### DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

*\*Gender:* Women's agreement levels were higher than men's (6.24 and 5.58, resp.).

*\*Age:* Those in the 25–29 age range agreed most strongly, and those 70 and older agreed the least.

*\*Education:* The more education, the stronger the agreement.

*Marital Status:* Agreement levels were similar in all status categories.

*\*Income:* The higher the income level, the stronger the agreement.

*Children:* There were no significant differences between parents and nonparents, and there were no significant differences among parents based on the number and ages of their children.

*\*Race & Ethnicity:* Asian participants had the strongest agreement, with American Indian having the least.

*\*Religion:* Those who identified as agnostic had significantly higher agreement, followed by atheist and Latter-day Saint respondents.

*\*Employment:* Full-time students had significantly higher agreement, with the unemployed having the least.

*Residency:* There were no significant differences among categories.

*\*Denotes statistically significant differences within the demographic categories.*

*\*Counties:* The highest agreement came from respondents in Cache, Davis, and Summit/Wasatch counties, with the lowest agreements from the Millard, Sevier, Juab, Beaver, and Piute grouping, along with Box Elder and Washington counties.

**3. Graduate Degrees:** The third survey item was “It is important for more Utah women to complete graduate degree programs.” The statistical mean was 5.79 (SD 1.32) for Sample 1 and 5.32 (SD 1.43) for Sample 2. In the combined samples, 62.7% selected “agree” or “strongly agree,” while only 5.1% disagreed. In the representative sample, 6.8% disagreed, but 30.8% selected “neither agree nor disagree.” In this sample, 69.2% agreed at some level. See the combined demographic findings below.

#### DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

*\*Gender:* Women’s agreement was significantly higher than men’s (5.67 and 5.46, resp.).

*Age:* There were no significant agreement differences by age.

*\*Education:* Those with bachelor and graduate degrees agreed most strongly.

*Marital Status:* There was no significant difference among marital status categories.

*\*Income:* Respondents with higher income levels had stronger agreement.

*Children:* There were no significant differences between parents and non-parents, and there were no significant differences among parents based on number or ages of their children.

*Race & Ethnicity:* There were no significant differences among race and ethnicity categories.

*\*Religion:* Those who selected agnostic and atheist had the highest agreement levels. There were no agreement differences among religious activity categories.

*\*Employment:* Full-time students had the highest agreement, while full-time homemakers had the least, but the statistical mean was still slightly higher than “somewhat agree.”

*Residency:* There were no significant differences in agreement levels.

*\*Counties:* The highest agreement (highest first) came from respondents in Summit/Wasatch; Cache; the Tooele, Morgan, and Rich grouping; Salt Lake; Utah; and Davis counties. The least agreement came from the remaining rural communities around the state.

**4. Women of Color:** The final survey item was “Women students of color face more barriers than other students when pursuing careers in high-wage, high-demand fields.” The statistical mean was 5.76 (SD 1.55) for Sample 1 (non-probability) and 4.88 (SD 1.68) for Sample 2 (representative). In the combined sample, 75.2% agree at some level with the statement. Most Utahns in either sample at least somewhat agreed that women students of color face more barriers. See the combined demographic findings below.

#### DEMOGRAPHIC FINDINGS

*\*Gender:* Women’s agreement was significantly higher than men’s (5.55 and 4.97, resp.).

*\*Age:* Participants 25–34 years of age were significantly more likely to agree, while those over 70 were significantly less likely.

*\*Education:* Those with bachelor and graduate degrees had higher agreement compared to other categories.

*Marital Status:* There were no significant differences among categories.

*\*Income:* Respondents in higher income categories had higher agreement levels.

*\*Children:* Nonparents had higher agreement than did parents with children living at home.

*Race & Ethnicity:* There were no significant differences in agreement based on race/ethnicity.

*\*Religion:* There were significant differences among religious affiliation choices, with agnostics and atheists having significantly higher agreement, followed by Protestants, spiritual but no affiliation, and all others. With religious activity level, those who chose “very active” had significantly lower agreement levels than all others.

*\*Employment:* Full-time homemakers had significantly lower agreement levels compared to all others.

*\*Residency:* Those who had lived in Utah between 2 and 10 years had the highest agreement levels.

*\*Counties:* The highest agreement levels came from residents in Salt Lake, Davis, Cache, and Summit/Wasatch. The lowest levels of agreement were found in the Millard, Sevier, Juab, Beaver, and Piute grouping, as well as Box Elder and the 10 combined rural eastern counties.

## CONCLUSION

This summary highlights key findings related to topics specifically focused on women’s higher educational attainment in Utah. Respondents from across the state participated in the study (see [Background & Methods](#) for the demographic details of both the non-probability and representative samples).

In summary, most Utahns acknowledged the broad value of higher education beyond the economic benefits. Utahns also understood at some level (women more than men) that inclusive environments are critical for people to feel as if they belong. Also, most respondents agreed that it was important for more women to complete graduate degrees. Finally, less than 18.0% of study participants disagreed that women of color face additional challenges when pursuing high-wage, high-demand careers.

The pursuit and completion of post-secondary certificates and degrees remains a critical component for the economic stability of families, communities, and the state as a whole. As research has shown, the more education one obtains, the more benefits one receives. Expanding access and opportunity to all Utahns will be important moving forward.

#### For questions and information:

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