

# ***Public Knowledge, Awareness and Support for Higher Education in Alabama***

**Report to the Alabama Commission on Higher Education  
December 16, 2002**

## **Overview**

This study summarizes the results of three state-wide telephone polls on the subject of higher education in Alabama. The first survey was conducted in July 2001 at the conclusion of the 2001 education proration crisis. The second survey was conducted in March 2002 to identify the agenda and priorities of Alabamians prior to the statewide elections. The third survey focused on the assessment of higher education by Alabamians, and was conducted in November 2002, following the general statewide elections. Each survey was conducted by the Center for Governmental Services at Auburn University<sup>1</sup>. The sample size for each survey ranged between 519 and 562. The margin of error for each survey is +/- 5%.

The results are grouped into four topical categories: (A) Importance of higher education and education issues to Alabamians; (B) Assessment of the quality of higher education in Alabama; (C) Awareness of and involvement with higher education programs and services; and (D) Assessment of the financial situation of higher education, and potential support for tax increases.

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December 16, 2002

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<sup>1</sup> The July and March surveys focused on a wide range of state issues. Only the November survey focused primarily on higher education in Alabama.

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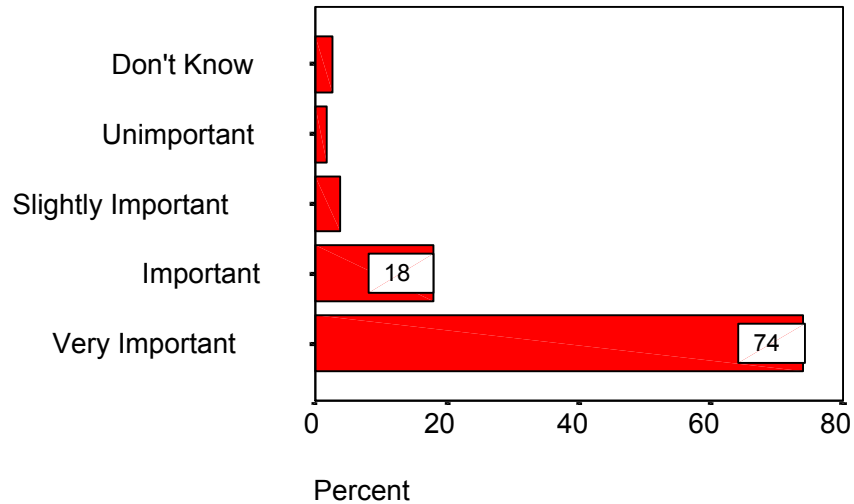
## **Major Findings**

- Higher education is an important issue for Alabamians. Nearly 9 out of 10 Alabamians believe that the quality of higher education is personally important to them.
- Alabamians perceive that the quality of our State colleges and universities is as good as those in other neighboring states.
- 67% concur that the reputation of Alabama's higher education system is very strong.
- In evaluating a group of state-level services, Higher Education received an overall grade of "C" or a 2.19 on a 4-point scale.
- Over two-thirds of the respondents agree that our colleges and universities are contributing significantly to the community in a wide range of areas.
- Over 60% of Alabamians agree that our higher education institutions provide a good return on the tax dollar.
- 86% of those who participated in a program at an Alabama college or university were satisfied or very satisfied with the experience.
- Nearly 90% of Alabamians were familiar with one or more programs or services provided at Alabama's colleges and universities, and more than 75% of those utilized one or more of these services or programs.
- 65% of Alabamians agree that the financial situation impacting higher education institutions in the State is serious.
- In November 2002, 60% of Alabamians would support a tax increase to benefit higher education.
- Both support and opposition to tax increases designed to benefit K-12 and higher education are becoming more intense and polarized.

## A. Importance of Higher Education to Alabamians

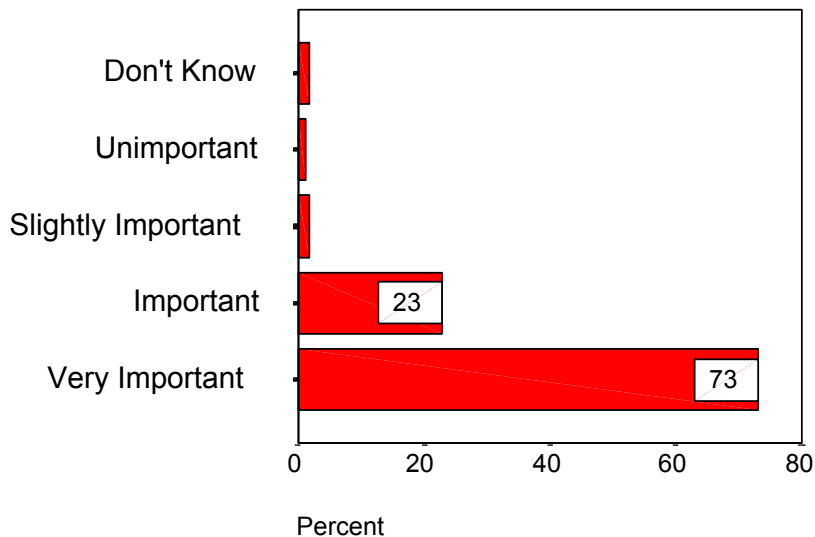
Higher education is an area that nearly all Alabamians agree is important to the general community and to individuals personally. In March 2002, ninety-two percent (92%) of Alabamians agreed that quality higher education is an *important* or *very important* policy area, and less than two percent (2%) perceived quality higher education to be *unimportant* (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Importance of Quality Higher Education to Alabama (March 2002)**



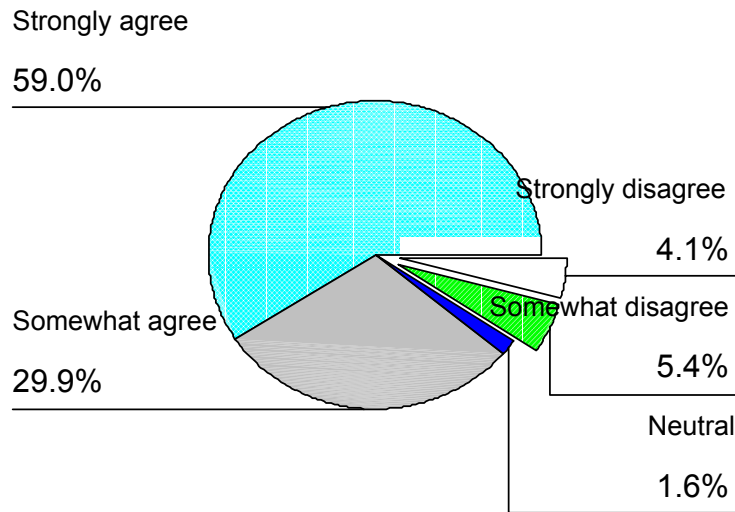
Kindergarten through high school education is important to nearly all Alabamians as well. In the same survey, ninety-six percent (96%) responded that K-12 education was *important* or *very important* to them.

**Figure 2: Importance of K-12 Education in Alabama (March 2002)**



Alabamians also believe that the quality of higher education has a personal impact on their lives. Nearly ninety percent of those polled in July 2001 *somewhat agreed* or *strongly agreed* with the statement that the *Quality of Higher Education in Alabama Affects Me*. Less than ten percent *disagreed* with this assessment (Figure 3).

**Figure 3: The Quality of Higher Education in Alabama Affects Me (July 2001)**



Overall, the findings from these surveys indicate that higher education is an important issue for Alabamians, and that nearly 9 out of 10 Alabamians perceive that the quality of higher education is personally important. It is evident that higher education is an issue that Alabamians care about and that personally affects them as well.

## B. Assessment of the Quality of Higher Education by Alabamians

Alabamians generally perceive that that quality of our State colleges and universities is as good as that in other neighboring states. In the March 2002 survey, only eleven percent (11.4%) of respondents considered Alabama's universities to be *worse* or *much worse* than universities in other states. On the other hand, only eighteen percent (18.2%) considered our universities to be *better* or *much better* than universities in other states (Table 1).

**Table 1: Alabama's Universities Compared to Other States (March 2002)**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Don't Know	73	13.0	13.0	13.0
Much Worse	9	1.6	1.6	14.6
Worse	55	9.8	9.8	24.4
About the same	323	57.5	57.5	81.9
Better	74	13.2	13.2	95.0
Much Better	28	5.0	5.0	100.0
Total	562	100.0	100.0	

Results from the November 2002 survey reinforce these generally positive findings. In this survey, sixty-seven percent (67.1%) of the respondents *agreed* or *strongly agreed* that the reputation of Alabama's higher education system is very strong (Table 2). In a separate question, fifty-nine percent (58.9%) *disagreed* or *strongly disagreed* with an assessment that Alabama's higher education system is very poor, while thirty percent (30.5%) *agreed* or *strongly agreed*.

**Table 2: Agree That the Reputation of Alabama's Higher Education System is Very Strong (November 2002)**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Don't Know/No Opinion	48	9.2	9.2	9.2
Strongly Disagree	24	4.6	4.6	13.9
Disagree	99	19.1	19.1	32.9
Agree	279	53.8	53.8	86.7
Strongly Agree	69	13.3	13.3	100.0
Total	519	100.0	100.0	

Although Alabamians tend to believe that their State universities and colleges enjoy a strong reputation, they see room for improvement. In a report card evaluation of state services, Higher Education received an overall grade of C or a 2.19 on a 4-point scale. While this evaluation is higher than that enjoyed by other state services, the grade

assessment indicates that the Alabama public sees considerable room for improvement in the state's higher education system.

**Table 3: Distribution of Assessment of State-level Public Services in Percent, and Average Grade and Score Assigned to Each Public Service (March 2002)**

Program Area	Very Poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Grade	Score
Pre-School Education	4	18	35	30	5	C	1.98
K-12 Education	4	23	36	27	5	C	1.96
<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>2.19</b>
Public Health	5	22	38	24	3	C-	1.82
Public Transportation	10	27	29	22	3	C-	1.63
Elderly Services	6	29	34	20	3	C-	1.64
Mental Health	6	21	30	22	3	D	1.50
Roads	8	24	37	22	5	C-	1.84

In November 2002, the Center for Governmental Services at Auburn University examined the perception of the contributions of Alabama's colleges and universities to the economy and quality of life of our citizens. Programs and services ranged from the promotion of high academic standards to facilitation of local workforce development (Table 4). In most issue areas over two thirds of the respondents *agree* or *strongly agree* that our colleges and universities are contributing to the community.

- 77% agree that the State's colleges and universities maintain **high academic standards**,
- 73% agree that the universities have increased the **diversity of their student populations**,
- 71% believe that the institutions of higher education have **improved the quality of life** in their community,
- 73% believe that the colleges and universities have **contributed to the economic development** of their community,
- 69% agree that the colleges and universities **provide workforce development** for employers in their community,
- 78% concur that Alabama's colleges and universities **equip students with the skills for success** in today's economy, and
- 69% agree that our colleges and universities **make valuable research contributions**.

**Table 4: Assessment of the Contributions of Alabama's Universities and Colleges (November 2002)**

Program Area	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Maintain High Academic Standards	3.1%	13.5%	62.8%	13.9%
2. Increased Diversity in the Student Population	1.5%	10.6%	60.3%	12.5%
3. Improved the Quality of Life in Your Community	2.5%	17.7%	59.7%	11.0%
4. Attract the Best Faculty and Teachers	3.7%	30.6%	44.5%	4.4%
5. Contribute to the Economic Development of Your Community	2.7%	16.8%	60.3%	12.5%
6. Provide Workforce Development for Employers in Your Community	1.9%	20.2%	58.4%	11.2%
7. Equip Students With the Skills to Succeed in Today's Economy	1.9%	12.5%	67.6%	9.1%
8. Provide Remedial Training for Students Who are Unprepared	1.5%	15.0%	59.0%	6.6%
9. Make Valuable Research Contributions	1.2%	12.3%	58.8%	10.2%

Overall, Alabamians assess quite highly the major activities that the colleges and universities perform. When asked if these institutions provide a good return on the tax dollar, over sixty percent agreed (60.7%), compared to twenty-five percent (25%) who disagreed (Table 5).

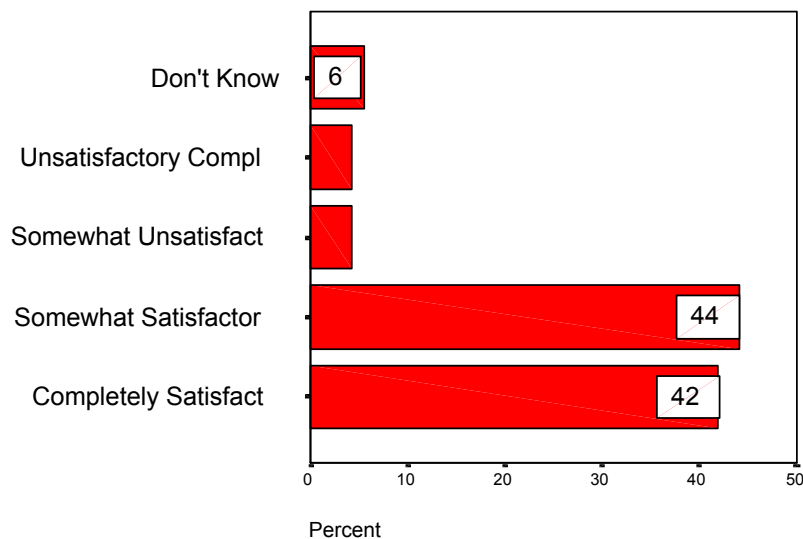
**Table 5: Alabama's Colleges and Universities Provide a Good Return on Your Tax Dollars Overall (November 2002)**

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Don't Know/No Opinion	74	14.3	14.3	14.3
Strongly Disagree	35	6.7	6.7	21.0
Disagree	95	18.3	18.3	39.3
Agree	272	52.4	52.4	91.7
Strongly Agree	43	8.3	8.3	100.0
Total	519	100.0	100.0	

### C. Awareness and Involvement of Alabamians With Programs and Services Provided by Higher Education Institutions

During the November 2002 survey, respondents were asked if they or a member of their immediate family had participated in a State college or university program during the past five years. Forty-six percent of the sample replied affirmatively, and twenty-one percent (21.4%) of the respondents are currently enrolled or have a family member currently enrolled in an Alabama college or university program. Of those who had availed themselves of these educational opportunities, eighty-six percent (86%) were somewhat or completely satisfied by the experience and only eight percent (8.4%) expressed dissatisfaction (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: How Satisfied Are You With Your Family's Experience? (November 2002)**



There is also a high level of awareness of the programs and services offered by Alabama's two and four year institutions of higher education. Over sixty percent of respondents were familiar with or aware of continuing education courses, college or university library services, cultural events, and small business courses. Fifty percent or more were aware of workforce training programs and youth development programs. Forty percent of respondents were aware of distance learning courses, and only eleven percent were not aware of any of these types of programs.

More than three quarters of those who were aware of one or more of the programs and services offered by the State's universities and colleges in the local community had availed themselves of one or more of these services. Thirty-six percent (36%) of the respondents or a member of their immediate family had taken a continuing education course at some time. Forty-two percent (42.2%) had utilized the services of the college or university library, and thirty-seven percent (36.6%) had attended one or more cultural events at one of our colleges or universities. Between fifteen to twenty percent of respondents noted that a member of the family had participated in a small business

course (17.7%), workforce training (14.8%), or youth development program (16.8%). Less than eleven percent (10.4%) had participated in a distance learning program, (Table 6).

**Table 6: Rate of Awareness and Participation in Alabama College and University Programs and/or Services (November 2002)**

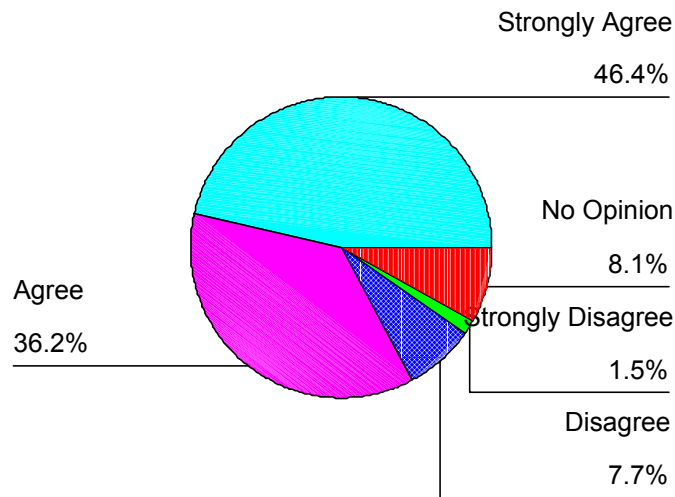
<b>Program or Service</b>	<b>Percent Awareness</b>	<b>Percent Participation</b>
1. Continuing Education Course	66.3	36.0
2. College or University Library	68.2	42.2
3. Cultural Events	62.4	36.6
4. Small Business courses	66.3	15.8
5. Workforce Training	55.9	14.8
6. Youth Development Programs	49.9	16.8
7. Community Revitalization Programs	34.9	7.1
8. Distance Learning Programs	41.2	10.4

The scope and reach of the programs and services of Alabama's colleges and universities is truly impressive. Only thirty-one percent of the households in Alabama have not used any service or program offered by an Alabama institution of higher education in recent years.

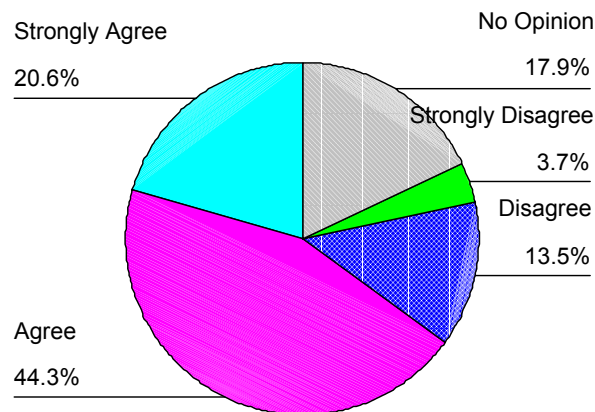
## D. Public Perspective on the Financial Situation of Higher Education in Alabama

Alabamians are well aware that the educational system at all levels is seriously strapped for funds. Eighty-three percent (82.6%) of Alabamians in November 2002 agreed that our K-12 systems are facing a serious financial situation, and relatively few Alabamians perceive that our K-12 systems are financially stable (9.2%) Sixty-five percent (64.9%) agreed that the financial situation for Alabama’s public community colleges and state universities is serious, while only seventeen percent (17.2) perceive that the colleges and state universities are not in deep financial stress. (Figures 5 - 6).

**Figure 5: Alabama’s Kindergarten Through High School Systems are Facing a Serious Financial Situation (November 2002)**

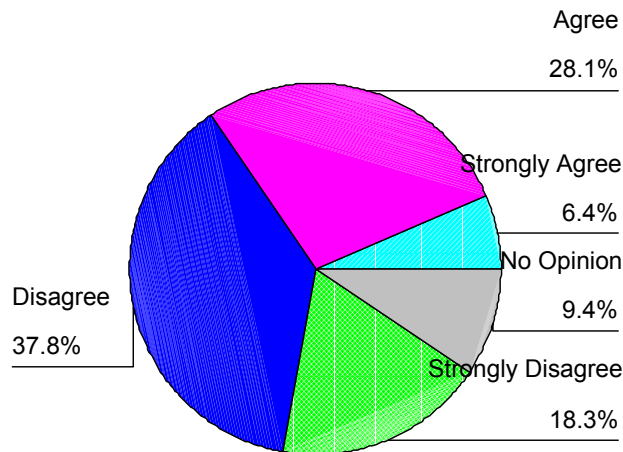


**Figure 6: Alabama’s Public Community Colleges and State Universities are Facing a Serious Financial Situation (November 2002)**

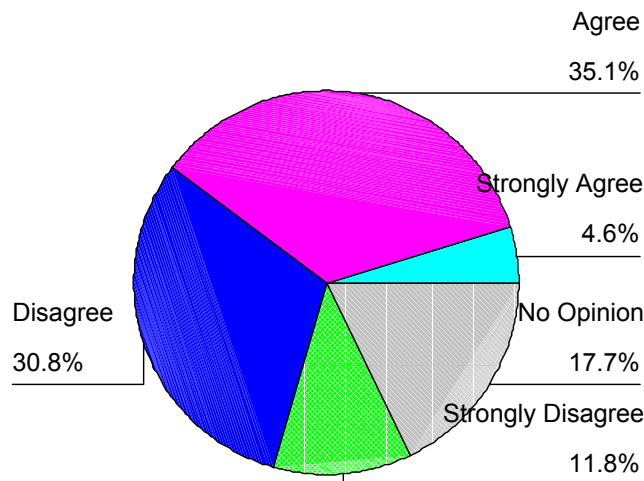


More than half of Alabamians (56.1%) believe that the State of Alabama is not providing a sufficient level of support for K through 12 education in the State, and forty-three percent (42.6%) believe that the State is not sufficiently supporting higher education. Significant proportions of Alabamians, however, believe that the State is providing sufficient financial resources to K-12 systems (34.5%) and to higher education as well (39.7%). It is interesting to note, however, that only eighteen percent (18.3%) of the respondents feel strongly that the State is not sufficiently supporting the K-12 systems, and only twelve percent (11.8%) of the respondents believe strongly that the State is financially neglecting higher education (Figures 7 – 8).

**Figure 7: The State of Alabama Provides a Sufficient Level of Financial Support for K-12 Education (November 2002)**



**Figure 8: The State of Alabama Provides a Sufficient Level of Financial Support for Higher Education (November 2002)**



During both the March 2002 and November 2002 surveys, CGS polled Alabamians about their willingness to support a tax increase in support of K-12 education and higher education in the State. In both surveys and for both levels of education there was majority public support for tax increases to strengthen the education systems. Both polls also indicated a greater willingness to raise taxes for K-12 education than for higher education (Table 7).

**Table 7: Percentage of Alabamians Favoring and Opposing Tax Increases to Benefit K-12 and Higher Education (March and November 2002)**

	K-12 Education Tax Support			Higher Education Tax Support		
	March 2002	Nov. 2002	Change	March 2002	Nov 2002	Change
Strong Opposition	4.5%	16.8%	+12.3%	4.3%	20.8%	+16.5%
Some Opposition	23.9%	9.6%	-14.3%	32.6%	13.9%	-18.7%
<b>Total Opposition</b>	<b>28.4%</b>	<b>26. %</b>	<b>-2.4%</b>	<b>36.9%</b>	<b>34.7%</b>	<b>-2.2%</b>
Strong Support	11.9%	38.2%	+26.3%	8.7%	25.2%	+16.5%
Some Support	54.5%	30.6%	-23.9%	43.8%	34.9%	-8.9%
<b>Total Support</b>	<b>66.4%</b>	<b>68.8%</b>	<b>+2.4%</b>	<b>52.5%</b>	<b>60.1%</b>	<b>+7.6%</b>

Although the gross levels of support and opposition to tax increases in support of education did not change markedly from March to November, the proportions of both those who were strongly opposed and who strongly supported a tax increase climbed markedly and significantly. Strong opposition to a tax increase in favor of K-12 education climbed twelve percentage points, and strong support climbed twenty-six percentage points. The change in higher education was similarly marked. Strong opposition for a tax increase to benefit higher education grew by sixteen percentage points, and strong support grew by fourteen points.

If these polarizing trends continue in the foreseeable future it will be very difficult for the Legislature and Governor to resolve differences and commit to a plan of support and financial enhancement of education in Alabama