



Georgians' Views on Higher Education in the State and Generally

When in the summer of 2005 the Peach State Poll had Georgians express their level of confidence in nine separate public institutions, the institution garnering the highest level of confidence was Georgia's system of public colleges and universities. In the same vein, the June 2006 Peach State Poll asked Georgians to rate their state on a number of aspects, and the aspect that received the highest percentage of excellent ratings was Georgia "as a place to attend a college or university" (30 percent). Public opinion data consistently show that Georgians have a high level of regard for institutions of higher education in the state. To get a more in-depth look at the public's views on higher education, the Fall 2007 Peach State Poll posited a wide array of questions about Georgia's colleges and universities, both public and private.¹ This report details the public's responses.

Rating Georgia's Colleges and Universities

Seventy-eight percent of Georgians rate the state's public and private four-year colleges and universities as either excellent (21 percent) or good (57 percent). Republicans, women, and those with post graduate degrees rated Georgia's four-year colleges and universities as excellent in significantly greater proportions than average (36 percent, 27 percent, and 28 percent, respectively).

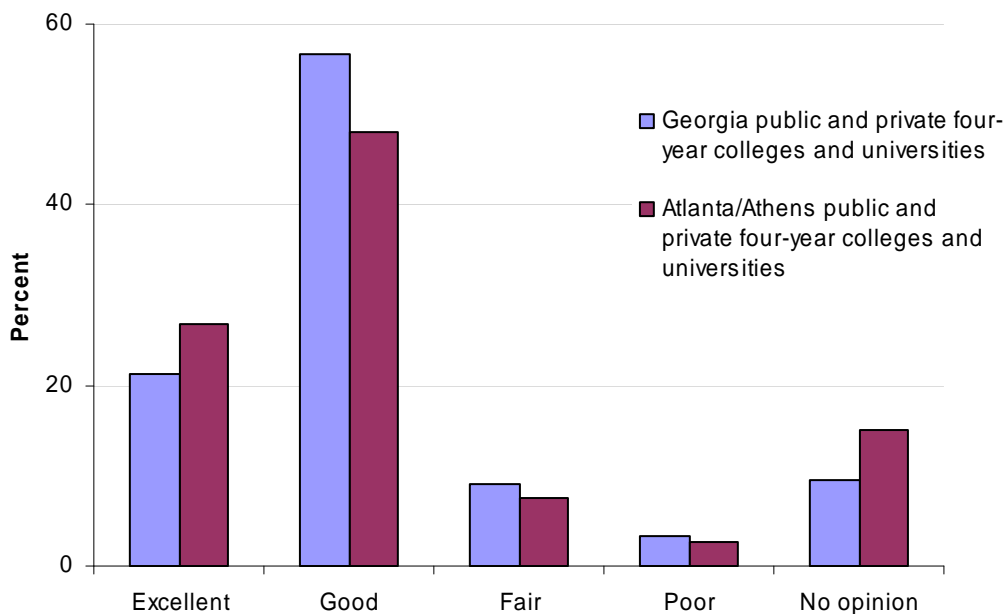
Twenty-seven percent of all Georgians rate the colleges and universities in the Atlanta and Athens area as excellent, and another 48 percent rate them as good. Figure 1 illustrates the relative public ratings for Georgia and Atlanta/Athens area colleges and universities. Republicans, those with postgraduate degrees, those aged 18 to 25, and those from households with incomes above \$100 thousand were more likely to rate colleges and universities in the Atlanta/Athens area as excellent (38 percent, 42 percent, 33 percent, and 34 percent, respectively). Additionally, those respondents with some connection to a college or university in the Atlanta/Athens area—either they or another household member attends or has attended a college in this area—were also more likely than others to rate these colleges as excellent.

Twelve percent of the public rated Georgia's colleges and universities as either fair (9 percent) or poor (3 percent), and 11 percent rated colleges and universities in the Atlanta/Athens area as

¹ The analysis and all conclusions drawn in this report are solely those of the author. The questions on higher education were designed by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government's Survey Research Unit in collaboration with the Atlanta Regional Council for Higher Education (ARCHE).

either fair (8 percent) or poor (3 percent). The public was much more likely to have no opinion on the colleges and university in the Atlanta/Athens area (15 percent) than those state wide (10 percent).

Figure 1. Public Ratings of Colleges and Universities in Georgia and in Atlanta and Athens



Prioritizing Goals for Higher Education

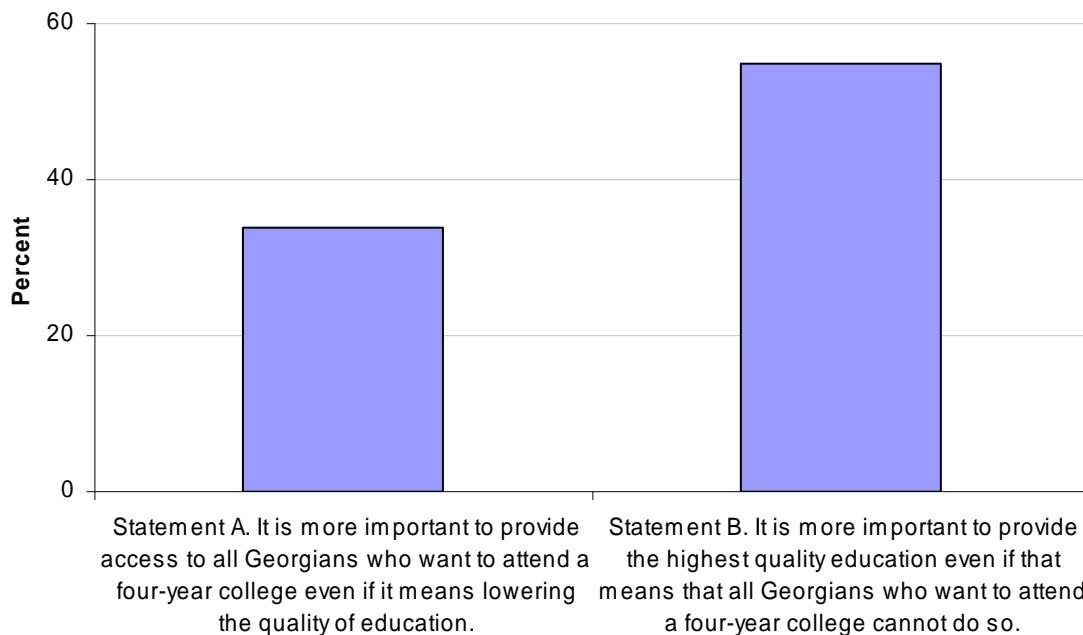
If we assume that quality comes at the cost of limiting access to colleges and universities and, conversely, increasing access has the cost of reduced quality, then Georgians show a hesitancy to accept lower quality for wider access. The Peach State Poll asked respondents to choose between the following two statements:

Statement A. It is more important to provide access to all Georgians who want to attend a four-year college even if it means lowering the quality of education.

Statement B. It is more important to provide the highest quality education even if that means that all Georgians who want to attend a four-year college cannot do so.

Fifty-five percent of Georgians chose Statement B, whereas only 34 percent chose Statement A (see Figure 2). In other words, a majority of residents do not want to substitute access for quality.

Figure 2. Public Assessment of the Relative Importance of Quality and Access in Regards to Higher Education Institutions



The support for Statement B (importance of highest quality even at the risk of less access) over Statement A (importance of access even at the cost of lower quality) does not differ significantly by the presence of high-school-aged children in the household; even for those who are most likely looking to gain access to college for their children, quality is more important to the majority. The data do show some small differences in opinion based on education, however; respondents with no education beyond high school are less likely to support Statement B (46 percent) and more likely to offer the response that they support both statements equally.

African Americans were more closely divided on this issue, with 48 percent supporting Statement B and 45 percent supporting Statement A. Whites, on the other hand, supported Statement B over Statement A by a much greater margin: 60 percent to 26 percent.

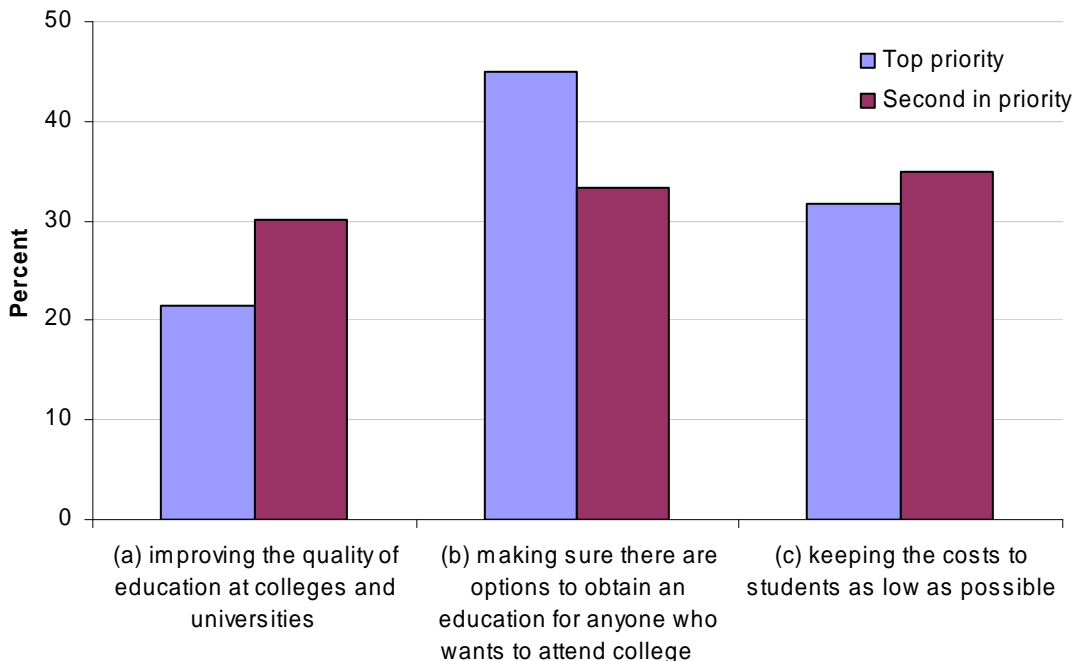
When it assumed that access does not impair quality and that the quality of Georgia’s colleges and universities is high—based on the ratings giving in this poll—then Georgians favor making sure that there are options for anyone who wants to attend college as a higher priority than keeping costs low and improving the quality of education at Georgia’s colleges and universities. Respondents were asked,

Which of the following do you think should be the single highest priority for the state of Georgia in regards to higher education: (a) improving the quality of education at colleges and universities, (b) making sure there are options to obtain

an education for anyone who wants to attend college, or (c) keeping the costs to students as low as possible?

The survey followed up by asking respondents to select their next highest priority (see Figure 3). Forty-five percent of Georgians selected making sure anyone who wants to attend college has some options as the top priority for Georgia’s colleges and universities, and another 33 percent listed it as the second in their order of priorities. Clearly, having access—making sure that there are options to obtain a college education for anyone who wants it—is a high priority for Georgians, but—all things being equal—they do not want to sacrifice the quality of Georgia’s higher education institutions.

Figure 3. Public Rankings of the Priorities for the State of Georgia in Regards to Higher Education



Thirty-two percent of respondents selected keeping costs low as the top priority for the state in regards to higher education, with another 35 percent selecting costs as their second priority. For those respondents who have children currently in high school, cost was the most cited top priority (41 percent), over access (39 percent) and quality (19 percent).

While only 21 percent of overall respondents selected improving quality as the top priority, and 30 percent selected it as the next priority, quality was the top priority for those with a post-graduate degree; 42 percent of post graduates selected quality over keeping costs low (27 percent) and making sure that there are options for those who want to attend college (26 percent). Given the fact that Georgians rate the quality of Georgia’s colleges and universities quite high

and a large majority believe that the cost of higher education is unaffordable, it is not too surprising that they prioritize access and costs over quality. It is also important to note that the priority related to quality was to “improve the quality” rather than to maintain quality. In the question asking respondents to choose between quality at the expense of access or access at the expense of quality, a majority of the public chose quality, suggesting that the *maintenance* of quality is the highest priority.

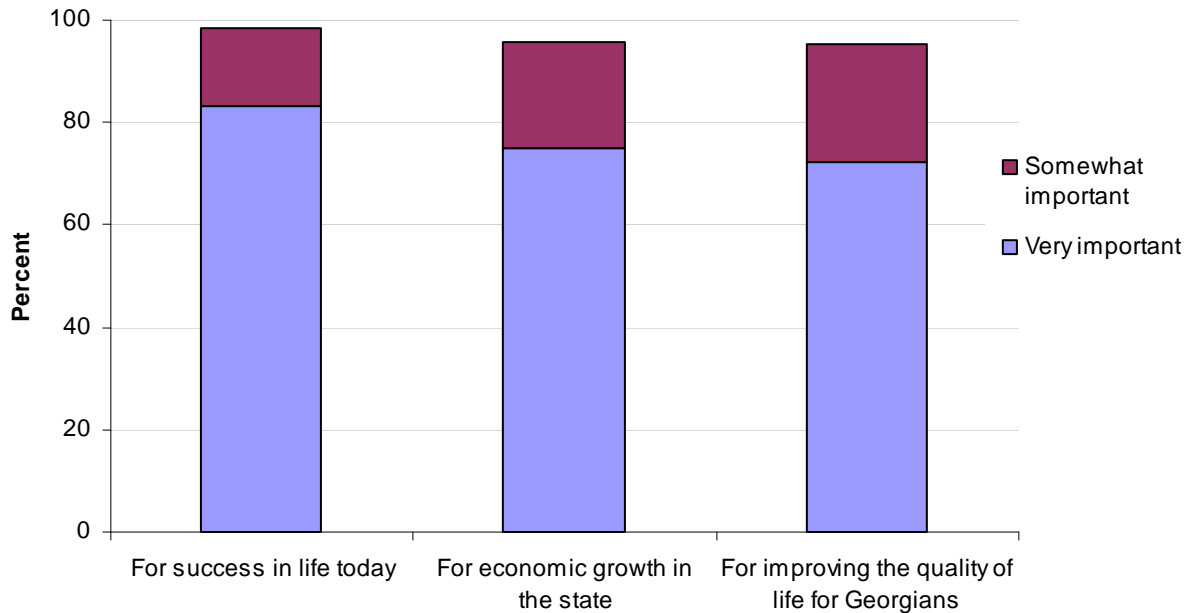
The Value of a College Education

More than four out of five respondents (83 percent) said that a college education is very important for an individual to succeed in life today, and another 15 percent said that it was somewhat important. Ninety-three percent of those from households with incomes less than \$20,000 said that a college education was very important for success. Interestingly, those without a college education were marginally more likely than those with a college degree to say that it was very important, but this difference is not statistically significant.

Three-quarters of all Georgians (75 percent) believe that Georgia’s colleges and universities are very important to economic growth in the state. There is a considerable difference in this perspective between those who live in the Atlanta region and those outside Atlanta; whereas 69 percent of residents in the Atlanta metropolitan area believe that Georgia’s universities and colleges are very important to economic growth in the state, 82 percent of those in the rest of the state hold this view.

By and large, Georgians are also likely to say that Georgia’s colleges and universities are very important to improving the quality of life for Georgia residents (72 percent). Improving the quality of life may mean many things, but taken as a whole it reflects the positive impact of higher education institutions on the communities they serve. Figure 4 shows the public’s perception of the relative importance of colleges and universities for personal success, economic vitality, and general quality of life.

Figure 4. Importance of College for Personal Success, Economy, and Quality of Life



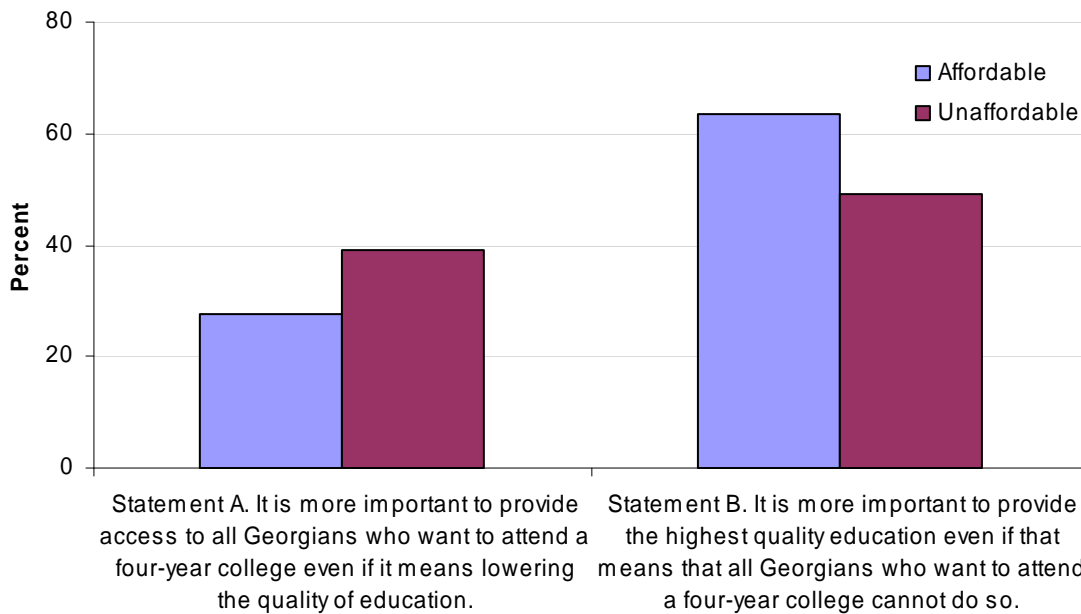
Affordability of College

As noted above, Georgians show some concern about the cost of higher education, and this is especially true among those with children in high school—the most likely to be taking a very close and practical look at those costs. When the Peach State Poll asked how affordable a college education is for someone who does not receive the HOPE scholarship,² a majority of respondents (61 percent) said that it was either very unaffordable (26 percent) or somewhat unaffordable (35 percent). Not surprisingly, Georgians from households with incomes of \$30,000 or less were significantly more likely to say that the cost of higher education is either very unaffordable (51 percent) or somewhat unaffordable (21 percent), affordability being relative.

One’s assessment of affordability appears to have an impact on assessment of the priorities that the state should have in regard to higher education. Improving quality becomes a greater priority with the perception that college is affordable. The contrast is also true: the priority placed on access increases with the perception that college is unaffordable. Figure 5 illustrates this relationship.

² Naturally, the HOPE scholarship changes the cost of college equation for recipients of the grants.

Figure 5. Relationship between Perceptions of Affordability of and Priorities for Higher Education

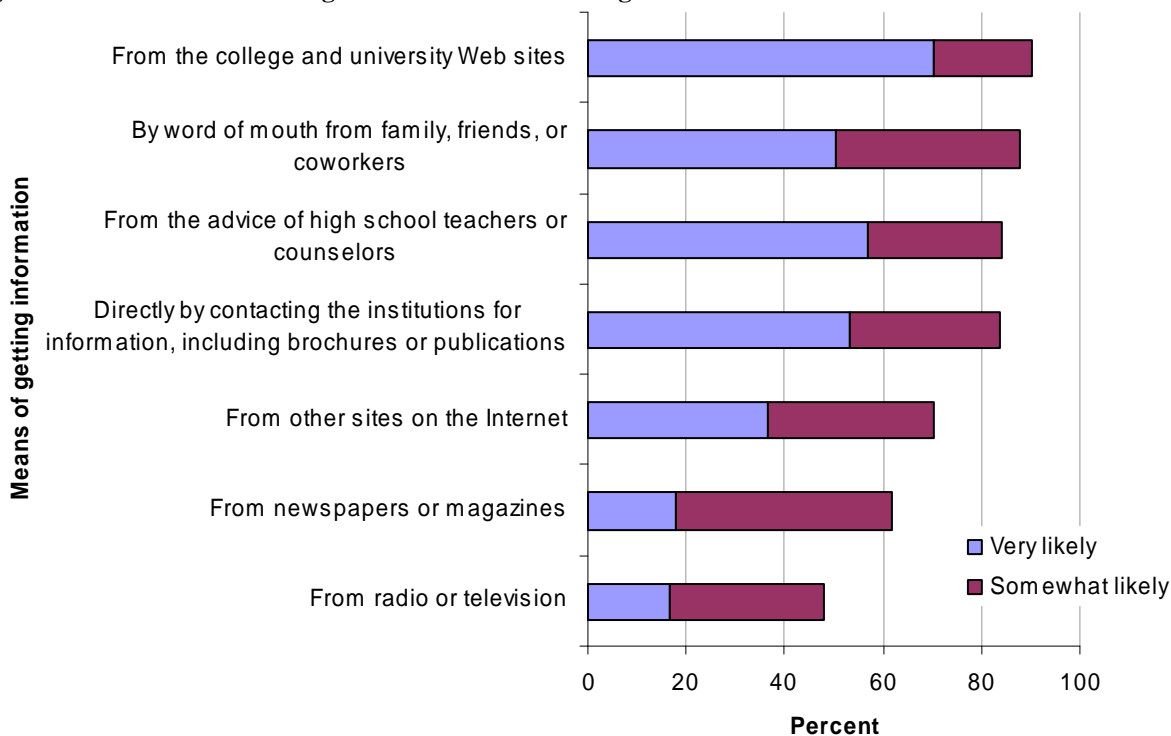


Gathering Information about Colleges

The most common way that Georgians get information about colleges and universities is from the institutions' Web sites; 70 percent of the respondents said that they are very likely to get information from the college's Web site, and another 20 percent said that they are somewhat likely to do so. Seventy-seven percent of respondents 45 years of age or younger said that they are very likely to get information directly from the college's Web site, compared with 61 percent of those over 45 years of age.

A majority of Georgians are also very likely to get information about colleges and universities from high school guidance counselors (57 percent), by contacting the institutions directly for brochures and publications (53 percent), and by word of mouth from family, friends, and coworkers (51 percent). Figure 6 illustrates the likelihood of using several methods to obtain information about colleges. Respondents cited radio and television as the least likely source of this information among the options suggested.

Figure 6. Sources for Gathering Information about Colleges and Universities

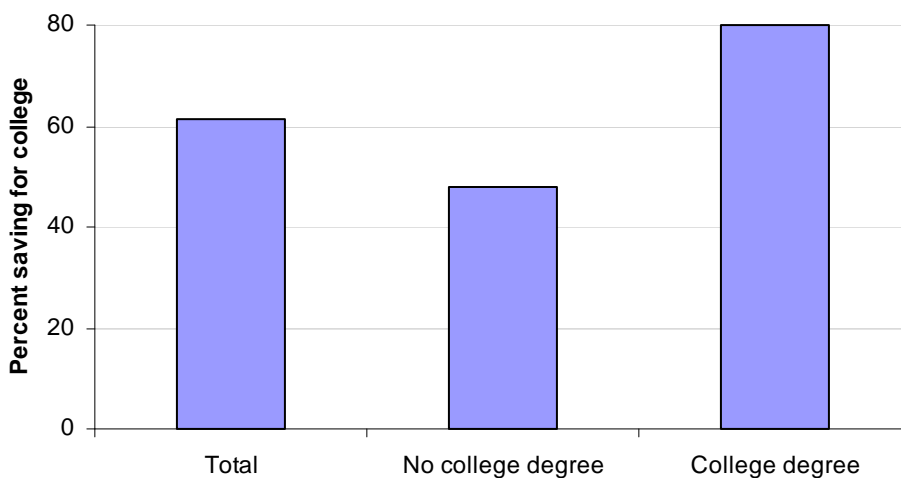


In addition to the methods of gathering information about which the poll specifically inquired, 15 percent of the respondents cited other sources. Most prominent among those other sources was visiting the college and talking directly with faculty or students, although this response was only proffered by 3 percent of the sample (or 17 percent of the 15 percent who said that they have other means for gathering such information).

Expectation of College for One’s Children

Of the 46 percent of respondents with children of high school age or younger in the household, 61 percent said that they have started saving to help their children pay for college. Those with college degrees are much more likely to be saving for college than are those without a college degree (see Figure 7), and those with higher incomes—which correlates highly with having a college degree—are also more likely to be saving for college.³ Seventy-five percent of those from households with incomes of \$75,000 or more have started saving for college, compared with 54 percent of those with household incomes below \$75,000. Clearly, the public’s perception of the importance of college is reflected in their allocating savings for college.

Figure 7. Propensity to Save for College by Respondent's Education Level



Eighty percent of respondents with kids not yet out of high school said that their oldest child of high school age or younger would be very likely to attend a four-year college or university, and another 12 percent said that their child is somewhat likely. Again, this further illustrates the public’s assessment of the importance of higher education. Additionally, 58 percent said that their child was very likely and another 32 percent said that their child was somewhat likely to attend a four-year college or university in Georgia.

Ninety-two percent of respondents with a college degree and children of high school age or younger said that their oldest child is very likely to attend a four-year college or university after graduating high school; by contrast, 71 percent of those without a college degree said that their oldest child was very likely to attend college after high school. There is a much smaller difference between college graduates and non-college graduates in the likelihood of children attending a four-year college in Georgia; 64 percent of those with a college degree compared with 53 percent of those without a degree said that their oldest child would be very likely to attend a Georgia college or university. Surprisingly, there is no relationship between one’s view

³ The relationships between education and saving and between income and saving are both statistically significant and robust.

of the importance of college for success and the likelihood of one's child attending college after high school.⁴

Eighty-eight percent of those who rated Georgia's public and private four-year colleges and universities as excellent said that their oldest child would very likely attend a four-year college or university in Georgia after graduating high school; by contrast, 56 percent of those who rated Georgia's colleges and universities as good said that their child would be very likely to attend one.

The data in this report are taken from a Peach State Poll conducted by the Carl Vinson Institute of Government between November 19 and December 2, 2007. The poll included 800 telephone interviews of randomly selected adults in Georgia. For a sample of this size, the margin of error at the 95 percent confidence level is +/- 3.5 percent for questions reporting the full sample. Although sampling error is only one source of potential survey error, precautions have been taken to minimize other sources of error for this survey.

The Carl Vinson Institute of Government, a public service and outreach unit of the University of Georgia, as part of its mission seeks to provide policymakers with systematic, objective research to inform policy decisions. In accordance with that mission, the Peach State Poll aims to give voice to the public on important policy matters and issues pertaining to political, social, and economic life in Georgia.

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⁴ In part, the absence of a statistical relationship between these two variables can be attributed to low variability in response frequencies for both.