

## Executive Summary

*This research report was prepared by the Institute for Local Government Administration and Rural Development (ILGARD) in conjunction with the Appalachian Access and Success project director for the Consortium of two- and four-year colleges in Ohio Appalachia. It provides an analysis of the barriers to, and influences on, access to higher education in the Ohio Appalachia region. The report examines individual, familial, institutional, and regional factors, with the aim of identifying points of intervention to improve access rates.*

Eighty percent of Ohio Appalachian high school seniors surveyed in the fall of 1991 stated that they wanted to attend college. Only one-third of this same group is likely to enroll in college the following fall. The higher education participation rate for the region is substantially lower than that for both Ohio, 53.8 percent of high school seniors, and for the United States, 62.4 percent.

Having suffered from structural changes during the last two decades, the Ohio Appalachia economy must be revitalized. To do so requires that the region's population be sufficiently well educated to meet the rising demands of the labor market.

This report is the research phase of the Appalachian Access and Success project. To examine the influences on participation, four groups were surveyed: high school seniors, their parents, the personnel at their high schools, and a group of nontraditional students who had graduated from high school in the Ohio Appalachian region and entered higher education after the age of 25. In addition, the region's economic and demographic characteristics were analyzed. The results confirm the existence of barriers very similar to those found in other studies of educational participation. The major findings related to barriers to access are presented as follows:

### Individual Influences

Individual influences include the high school students' academic ability, aspirations, and expectations. Barriers identified include the following:

- high actual cost of higher education, and the desire on the part of students to earn an immediate income;
- perceived high cost of higher education--seniors tend to overestimate the cost of college;
- lack of information about college costs and financial aid availability. Seniors are unclear about exactly how they will finance their college education;
- low self-esteem: only a very small proportion of high school seniors regard themselves as above average intelligence
- some worried that they would not fit in to college, others felt

- that poor grades in high school would prevent them from gaining a college education;
- lack of information about college educational programs;
- lack of information about the skills required in the labor market.

### **Familial Influences**

Familial factors include the family's three functions as resource providers, role models, and encouragers of higher education. Barriers related to the family include the following:

- low level of parental educational attainment. Parents without college experience are less able to help their children with the complex college and financial aid application processes and cannot act as role models for the benefits of higher education;
- low average family incomes. Family income is one of the most reliable predictors of educational attainment;
- parents' inability to save for their children's college education;
- lack of siblings who have attended college and could provide role models.

### **Institutional Influences**

Institutional factors cover the role of high school personnel--teachers, counselors, and others--as promoters of higher education and informational resources. Barriers in the school include the following:

- high school personnel are dissatisfied with the information being provided to them by area colleges on college costs, financial aid availability, college entrance requirements, and academic expectations. Without this information, they are limited in the help they can offer to students;
- high school personnel do not think that most of their students are educationally prepared for college, although they do not think that most of them should attend college. They are thus less likely to encourage the option of college for those they do not consider capable of success;
- high school personnel, although they acknowledge the importance of parental influence, believe lack of parental encouragement to be a major barrier to college enrollment.

### **Regional Influences**

The economic and demographic characteristics of Ohio Appalachia as pertaining to educational participation are significant regional influences. While the regional influences examined may not be barriers in and of themselves, they are indicative of the lack of environment supportive of higher education. They also demonstrate the necessity of revitalizing the regional economy, a task which is inextricably linked to improving the educational attainment of the region's population. Factors of interest in the regional economic and demographic environment include the following:

- significantly lower per capita and family incomes than Ohio and the United States;
- higher unemployment than in Ohio;
- a concentration of poverty in Ohio Appalachia;
- job losses in the well-paid mining and manufacturing sectors, which have been replaced with lower paying retail and service sector jobs;
- higher outmigration than Ohio in the 20-34 year old age group, particularly in those counties that have suffered from large losses of employment;
- the declining size of the traditional college-age population due to demographic shifts, thereby creating an incentive for area colleges to increase recruitment efforts;
- higher dependency ratios than Ohio. Thus, there are more economically non-productive individuals as a proportion of the economically productive segment of the population.

## **Conclusions**

The increasingly complex society in the United States is demanding ever higher levels of knowledge and skills from its citizens, both in the labor force and in everyday life. Whether seen from a moral perspective on equality of opportunity or from a functional perspective on the necessity of an adequately educated labor force, the low rate of higher education participation in Ohio Appalachia is therefore of great concern.