Stakeholder Perspectives illustrate how the framework can be used by various groups as a lens through which one understands and measures post-collegiate outcomes. In this document outcomes of primary interest to policy makers are placed within the framework and additional connections are drawn to related, but sometimes less-considered, outcomes.

Public spending by local, state, and federal governments provides critical support to higher education. As such, policy makers insist on understanding the economic return of those investments. The Post-Collegiate Outcomes (PCO) Framework (see Figure 1) with its comprehensive array of college outcomes along the public, personal, economic, and human capital continua offers policy makers an opportunity to consider future returns on their investment in higher education.

Figure 1: PCO Framework

Higher education is an important driver of the economy since individuals with greater levels of education generate more tax revenue to local, state, and federal governments. Individuals’ earnings, on average,

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increase in direct relation to post-secondary educational attainment (Carnevale, Rose, and Cheah (2011). Furthermore, higher earnings contribute to the real-estate tax base as a result of higher rates of home ownership among these individuals. It is evident that monies invested in post-secondary education provide an economic return that benefits the public (i.e., within public economic quadrant). Consequently, policy makers have focused attention on graduates’ earnings and deemed them a critical post-collegiate outcome.

Moreover, students and workers who have attained higher levels of education draw less frequently on the resources of social support mechanisms. They are less likely to be unemployed, less likely to be incarcerated, less likely to have poor health, and less likely to use federal or state social services, such as food stamps or welfare. Examples of how to measure public economic outcomes include:

- size or value of national or state tax base;
- expenditures on and use of social service programs; and
- unemployment rates in high-demand fields.

While the pursuit of post-secondary educational experiences provides important economic returns to the public, the PCO Framework also draws attention to the essential non-economic, or human capital, returns provided when individuals attain higher levels of education. Post-secondary experiences are associated with public human capital outcomes such as higher rates of giving to communities through volunteerism, civic engagement, voting, and participation in cultural activities. The broader communities in which college students and graduates live and work are enriched by these kinds of engagement. Some colleges and universities are intentional in their design of programs and activities that increase social awareness and promote civic engagement among their student body.

Outcomes associated with the public human capital quadrant may be measured in a variety of ways:

- voter participation by educational attainment level;
- charitable donations by educational attainment level; and
- participation in arts and cultural activities by educational attainment level.

At the other end of the public/personal continua in the PCO Framework lies outcomes of an individual nature, in both economic and human capital. Along with higher earnings, fringe benefits and personal rates of savings increase with higher levels of education. Furthermore, the knowledge, skills, and ways of making meaning acquired by students through postsecondary experiences lend themselves to greater success in life and career. Higher levels of educational attainment correspond to a greater sense of self-worth, better health, and longer life expectancy. Personal intellectual growth (e.g., critical thinking ability, problem-solving skills), discipline- and occupation-specific skills, and interpersonal competencies also
shape how graduates initially engage in, move around within, or change out of careers.

Potential measures for outcomes of in the personal quadrants include:

- earnings;
- career advancement;
- application of critical thinking, problem-solving, and communications skills in workplace and other settings; and
- career satisfaction.

By using the PCO Framework as a lens through which to understand and measure the outcomes of a postsecondary education, policy makers can see that state, local, and federal returns on investment include personal outcomes of both economic and human capital that are linked to public outcomes such as tax revenue and communities enriched by higher rates of giving. The outcomes of a post-secondary education allow individuals to be more adaptable employees, more engaged citizens, and better informed consumers.

College and universities can use the PCO Framework to select the outcomes and measurements that best represent the mission and priorities of their campus and more clearly communicate that information to policy makers. The more widespread collection and dissemination of post-collegiate outcome information allows policy makers to better understand the returns of public spending for higher education.

References

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