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# Executive Summary

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According to the 2013 Census, 43 percent of Nebraska’s working age adults (ages 25 – 64) have a two- or four-year college degree, higher than the national average of 40 percent. Recent national and state initiatives seek to increase the numbers who earn a postsecondary degree. A report released by the Georgetown University Center on Education and Workforce indicates two-thirds of Nebraska’s jobs will require some type of postsecondary education degree by 2018. Given these trends and opportunities, how many rural Nebraskans have recently participated in education or training activities and what types? How satisfied are they with various delivery methods of education and training? Do rural Nebraskans view higher education as important for individuals and the economy? This paper provides a detailed analysis of these questions.

This report details 1,991 responses to the 2015 Nebraska Rural Poll, the twentieth annual effort to understand rural Nebraskans’ perceptions. Respondents were asked a series of questions about education. Comparisons are made among different respondent subgroups, that is, comparisons by age, occupation, region, etc. Based on these analyses, some key findings emerged:

- **Many rural Nebraskans have participated in education or training activities during the past two years.** Almost one-half (48%) of rural Nebraskans have participated in these activities in the past two years.
  - ✓ *Most of the respondents who had taken education or training activities during the past two years have taken in person seminars or workshops for their job.* Approximately two-thirds (67%) of persons who had participated in education or training have taken in person job-related seminars or workshops. Many respondents have also taken the following: in person courses for continuing education credits (41%); online webinars for their job (40%); in person courses to complete or count toward a certification program (31%); in person seminars or workshops for their own general interest (28%); online courses for continuing education units (27%); and in person non-credit courses for their own general interest (21%).
- **Overall, most rural Nebraskans who have taken education or training are satisfied with both online and traditional in-person delivery methods. However, rural Nebraskans are most satisfied with in-person delivery methods.** Almost nine in ten persons (88%) are satisfied with in-person seminars or workshops. Just over eight in ten persons (83%) are satisfied with traditional in-person credit courses. Seven in ten persons (70%) are satisfied with online webinars or workshops and just over two-thirds (68%) report satisfaction with online credit courses.
- **Rural Nebraskans believe a college education is important for individuals as well as the economy.** Seven in ten rural Nebraskans (70%) agree that getting a college education today is more important than it was 10 years ago. And, almost two-thirds (65%) agree that in order to get ahead in life these days, it’s necessary for a person to get a college education. Just over one-half of rural Nebraskans

(53%) agree that increasing the number of people who get college degrees is necessary to build a strong economy.

- **Rural Nebraskans are confident that higher education can lead to a good job.** While just under one-half (48%) agree that a high school diploma can lead to a good job, at least three-quarters agree that an associate degree (75%) or a bachelor's degree (79%) can lead to a good job.
  - ✓ *Younger persons are more likely than older persons to agree that having a high school diploma can lead to a good job.* Almost six in ten persons age 19 to 29 (59%) agree with this statement, compared to 43 percent of persons age 40 to 64.
  - ✓ *Persons with at least a four year degree are more likely than persons with less education to agree that they are confident that having a bachelor's degree can lead to a good job.* Eighty-five percent of persons with at least a four year degree agree with this statement, compared to 73 percent of persons with a high school diploma or less education.
- **Rural Nebraskans have mixed opinions about online education.** Almost equal proportions both agree (36%) and disagree (34%) that an online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom. However, persons who have taken an online course for a degree program (associate, bachelors, masters or other advanced degree) in the past two years are more likely than those who have not to agree with this statement. Almost one-half (47%) of persons who have taken an online course for a degree program in the past two years agree that an online course provides an equal educational value as a course taken in a classroom. Just over one-third (36%) of the recent online course takers disagree with the statement.
  - ✓ *Persons age 40 to 49 are more likely than persons of different ages to agree that an online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom.* Forty percent of persons age 40 to 49 agree with this statement, compared to 33 percent of persons age 19 to 29. The youngest persons are the age group most likely to disagree with the statement (45%).
- **When looking ten years into the future, many rural Nebraskans believe high school students in their community will take most of their classes online.** Four in ten rural Nebraskans (40%) agree with that statement. Almost three in ten (29%) disagree.
  - ✓ *Residents of the Panhandle are more likely than residents of other regions of the state to agree that high school students in their community will take most of their classes online ten years from now.* Almost one-half (47%) of Panhandle residents agree with this statement, compared to 33 percent of persons living in the Southeast region of the state.

## Introduction

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According to the 2013 Census, 43 percent of Nebraska’s working age adults (ages 25 – 64) have a two- or four-year college degree, higher than the national average of 40 percent. Recent national and state initiatives seek to increase the numbers who earn a postsecondary degree. A report released by the Georgetown University Center on Education and Workforce indicates two-thirds of Nebraska’s jobs will require some type of postsecondary education degree by 2018. Given these trends and opportunities, how many rural Nebraskans have recently participated in education or training activities and what types? How satisfied are they with various delivery methods of education and training? Do rural Nebraskans view higher education as important for individuals and the economy? This paper provides a detailed analysis of these questions.

This report details 1,991 responses to the 2015 Nebraska Rural Poll, the twentieth annual effort to understand rural Nebraskans’ perceptions. Respondents were asked a series of questions about education.

### *Methodology and Respondent Profile*

This study is based on 1,991 responses from Nebraskans living in 86 counties in the state.<sup>1</sup> A self-administered questionnaire was mailed in

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<sup>1</sup> In the spring of 2013, the Grand Island area (Hall, Hamilton, Howard and Merrick Counties) was designated a metropolitan area. To facilitate comparisons from previous years, these four counties are still included in our sample. In addition, the Sioux City area metropolitan counties of Dixon and Dakota were added in 2014. Although classified as metro, Dixon County is rural in nature. Dakota County is similar in many respects to other “micropolitan” counties the Rural Poll surveys.

April to 6,228 randomly selected households. Metropolitan counties not included in the sample were Cass, Douglas, Lancaster, Sarpy, Saunders, Seward and Washington. The 14-page questionnaire included questions pertaining to well-being, community, climate and energy, community involvement, and education. This paper reports only results from the education section.

A 32% response rate was achieved using the total design method (Dillman, 1978). The sequence of steps used follow:

1. A pre-notification letter was sent requesting participation in the study.
2. The questionnaire was mailed with an informal letter signed by the project director approximately seven days later.
3. A reminder postcard was sent to the entire sample approximately seven days after the questionnaire had been sent.
4. Those who had not yet responded within approximately 14 days of the original mailing were sent a replacement questionnaire.

Appendix Table 1 shows demographic data from this year’s study and previous rural polls, as well as similar data based on the entire nonmetropolitan population of Nebraska (using the latest available data from the 2009 - 2013 American Community Survey). As can be seen from the table, there are some marked differences between some of the demographic variables in our sample compared to the Census data. Thus, we suggest the reader use caution in generalizing our data to all rural Nebraska. However, given the random sampling frame used for this survey, the acceptable percentage of responses, and the large number of respondents, we feel the data provide useful insights into opinions of rural Nebraskans on the various issues presented in this report. The

margin of error for this study is plus or minus two percent.

Since younger residents have typically been under-represented by survey respondents and older residents have been over-represented, weights were used to adjust the sample to match the age distribution in the nonmetropolitan counties in Nebraska (using U.S. Census figures from 2010).

The average age of respondents is 51 years. Sixty-eight percent are married (Appendix Table 1) and 72 percent live within the city limits of a town or village. On average, respondents have lived in Nebraska 43 years and have lived in their current community 27 years. Fifty-five percent are living in or near towns or villages with populations less than 5,000. Most have attained at least a high school diploma (97%). Thirty percent of the respondents report their 2014 approximate household income from all sources, before taxes, as below \$40,000. Fifty-eight percent report incomes over \$50,000.

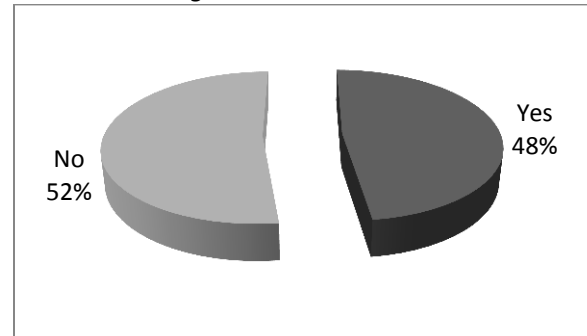
Seventy-six percent were employed in 2014 on a full-time, part-time, or seasonal basis. Seventeen percent are retired. Thirty-five percent of those employed reported working in a management, professional, or education occupation. Fourteen percent indicated they were employed in agriculture.

### **Education or Training Taken**

Respondents were first asked if they have participated in any formal education courses, workshops, webinars or other training activities during the past two years.

Many rural Nebraskans have participated in education or training activities during the past two years. Almost one-half (48%) of rural

**Figure 1. Participation in Education or Training Activities during Past Two Years**



Nebraskans have participated in these activities in the past two years (Figure 1).

Participation in education or training activities was examined by community size, region and various individual attributes (Appendix Table 2). Differences are detected by each of the individual attributes examined.

Persons with higher household incomes are more likely than persons with lower incomes to have participated in any education or training activities during the past two years. Over six in ten persons with household incomes of \$60,000 or more (62%) have participated in education or training activities, compared to 20 percent of persons with household incomes of \$20,000 or less.

Younger persons are more likely than older persons to have taken education or training during the past two years. Approximately two-thirds (67%) of persons age 19 to 29 have participated in education or training activities during the past two years, compared to 21 percent of persons age 65 and older.

Other groups most likely to have participated in education or training activities during the past two years include: females, married persons, persons who have never married, persons with higher education levels, and persons with

management, professional or education occupations.

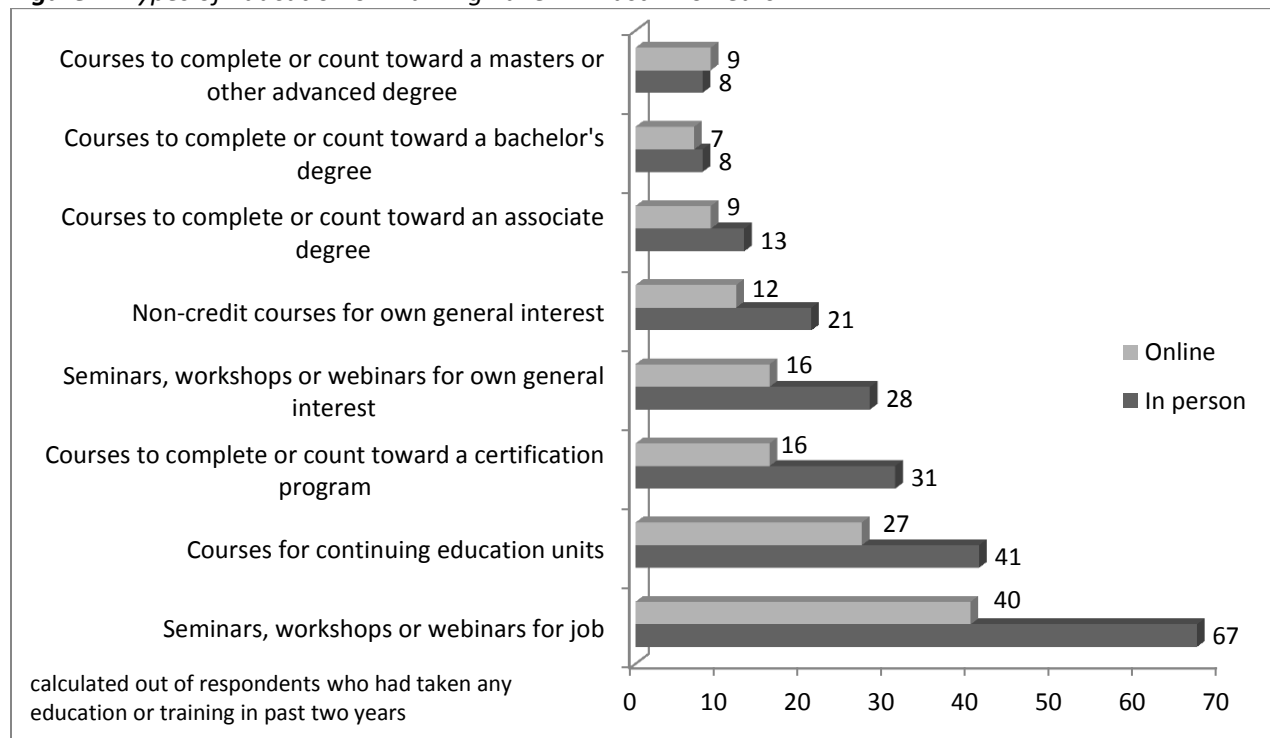
The respondents who indicated they had participated in education or training activities during the past two years were next asked what types they had taken and how they took it (in person or online). Most of the respondents who had taken education or training activities during the past two years have taken in person seminars or workshops for their job. Approximately two-thirds (67%) of persons who had participated in education or training have taken in person job-related seminars or workshops (Figure 2). Many respondents have also taken the following: in person courses for continuing education credits (41%); online webinars for their job (40%); in person courses to complete or count toward a certification program (31%); in person seminars or workshops for their own general interest (28%); online courses for continuing education units (27%); and in person non-credit courses for their own general interest (21%).

(27%); and in person non-credit courses for their own general interest (21%).

Participation in the various types of education or training activities is examined by community size, region and various individual attributes (Appendix Table 3). Many differences emerge.

Persons living in or near smaller communities are more likely than persons living in or near larger communities to have taken the following types of education or training: in person courses to complete or count toward an associate degree; in person courses to complete or count toward a certification program; and in person seminars or workshops for their job. Persons living in or near larger communities are more likely than persons living in or near smaller communities to have participated in online courses for a bachelor's degree and online non-credit courses for their general interest.

**Figure 2. Types of Education or Training Taken in Past Two Years**



Many regional differences also occur. Residents of both the Panhandle and the North Central region are the groups most likely to have taken in person courses for an associate degree. Panhandle residents are also most likely to have taken online courses for an associate degree.

Residents of both the North Central and South Central regions are most likely to have taken in person courses for a bachelor's degree. Residents of the Northeast region are the group *least* likely to have taken online courses for a bachelor's degree. But, they are the group most likely to have taken in person courses for a masters or other advanced degree and in person courses for continuing education credits. Residents of the Southeast region are the group most likely to have participated in online webinars for their job.

Persons with household incomes ranging from \$20,000 to \$39,999 are the income group most likely to have taken the following: in person courses for an associate degree, in person courses for a bachelor's degree, online courses for a bachelor's degree and in person non-credit courses for their own general interest.

Persons with the highest levels of household income are more likely than persons with less income to have taken the following types of education or training: online courses for a masters or other advanced degree; courses for continuing education units, both in person and online; and seminars, workshops or webinars for their job, both in person and online.

The youngest persons are more likely than older persons to have taken the following: courses for an associate degree, both online and in person; courses for a bachelor's degree, both online and in person; courses for a masters or other advanced degree, both online and in person;

and in person seminars or workshops for their job.

Persons age 40 to 49 are the age group most likely to have taken online courses for a certification program. Persons age 30 to 49 are the age groups most likely to have taken online courses for continuing education units and online seminars, workshops or webinars for their job. Persons age 30 to 39 are the age group most likely to have taken online non-credit courses for their own general interest as well as online webinars for their own general interest. The oldest persons are the group most likely to have taken in person non-credit courses for their own general interest and in person seminars or workshops for their own general interest.

When comparing genders, females are more likely than males to have taken the following types of education or training: online courses for an associate degree; courses for a masters or other advanced degree, both in person and online; courses for continuing education units, both in person and online; and online webinars for their job. Males are more likely than females to have taken in person courses for a certification program.

Persons with some college education but without a four year degree are the education group most likely to have taken courses for an associate degree, both in person and online. Persons with the highest education levels are the group most likely to have taken the following: courses for a masters or other advanced degree, both in person and online; courses for continuing education units, both in person and online; and seminars, workshops, or webinars for their job, both in person and online. Persons without any college education are the group most likely to have taken in person courses for a certification program.



Many differences also exist by occupation. Persons with food service or personal care occupations are more likely than persons with different occupations to have taken courses for an associate degree, both in person and online. They, along with persons with occupations in agriculture, are also most likely to have taken in person non-credit courses for their own general interest.

Persons with management, professional or education occupations are more likely than persons with different occupations to have taken courses for a masters or other advanced degree, both in person and online. Persons with occupations in agriculture are the occupation group most likely to have taken in person courses for a certification program and in person seminars or workshops for their own general interest.

Persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations are the group most likely to have taken courses for continuing education units, both in person and online. They also join persons with occupations in agriculture and persons with management, professional or education occupations as the groups most likely to have taken in person seminars or workshops for their job.

Persons with occupations classified as other are the group most likely to have taken online courses for a certification program. Online webinars for their job are most likely to have been taken by persons with sales or office support occupations. And, persons with occupations in production, transportation or warehousing are the group most likely to have taken online webinars for their own general interest.

## Satisfaction with Types of Education or Training

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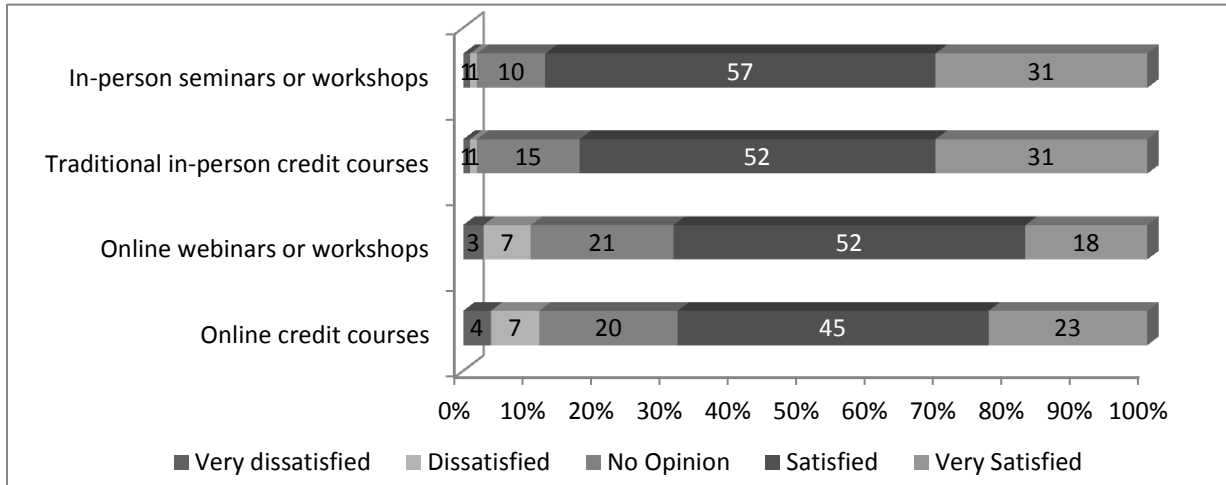
Next, respondents who had taken some education or training in the last two years were asked how satisfied they are with various delivery methods of these courses or activities. Persons who answered does not apply were excluded from the following calculations.

Overall, rural Nebraskans who have taken education or training are satisfied with both online and traditional in-person delivery methods. However, rural Nebraskans are most satisfied with in-person delivery methods. Almost nine in ten persons (88%) are satisfied with in-person seminars or workshops (Figure 3). Just over eight in ten persons (83%) are satisfied with traditional in-person credit courses. Seven in ten persons (70%) are satisfied with online webinars or workshops and just over two-thirds (68%) report satisfaction with online credit courses.

Satisfaction with these delivery methods differ by community size, region and various individual attributes (Appendix Table 4). Residents of the Southeast region are more likely than residents of other regions of the state to be satisfied with online credit courses. Eighty-two percent of Southeast region residents are satisfied with online credit courses, compared to 55 percent of residents of the North Central region.

Persons age 30 to 39 are more likely than persons both younger and older to be satisfied with online credit courses. Eighty-three percent of persons age 30 to 39 report being satisfied with online credit courses, compared to 45 percent of persons age 65 and older (Figure 4).

**Figure 3. Satisfaction with Types of Education or Training**



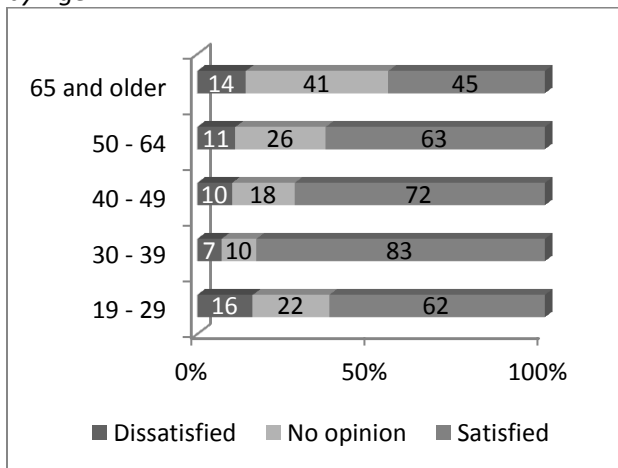
The other groups most likely to express satisfaction with online credit courses include: persons with higher household incomes, females, persons with higher education levels, persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations, and persons with sales or office support occupations.

The groups most likely to report satisfaction with online webinars or workshops include: persons with higher household incomes, females, persons with higher education levels

and persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations.

Persons living in or near larger communities are more likely than persons living in or near smaller communities to be satisfied with traditional in-person credit courses. Approximately nine in ten persons living in or near communities with populations of 5,000 or more are satisfied with traditional in-person credit courses, compared to 75 percent of persons living in or near communities with populations ranging from 1,000 to 4,999.

**Figure 4. Satisfaction with Online Credit Courses by Age**



Other groups most likely to express satisfaction with traditional in-person credit courses include: persons with the highest household incomes, females, persons with higher education levels, persons with sales or office support occupations, and persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations.

Persons with the highest household incomes and females are the groups most likely to be satisfied with in-person seminars or workshops.

## Opinions about Education

Finally, all respondents were asked if they agree or disagree with various statements about education. Rural Nebraskans believe education is important for individuals as well as the state. Seven in ten rural Nebraskans (70%) agree that getting a college education today is more important than it was 10 years ago (Table 1). And, almost two-thirds (65%) agree that in order to get ahead in life these days, it's necessary for a person to get a college education. Just over one-half of rural Nebraskans (53%) agree that increasing the number of people who get college degrees is necessary to build a strong economy.

Rural Nebraskans are confident that higher

education can lead to a good job. While just under one-half (48%) agree that a high school diploma can lead to a good job, at least three-quarters agree that an associate degree (75%) or a bachelor's degree (79%) can lead to a good job.

Rural Nebraskans have mixed opinions about online education. Almost equal proportions both agree (36%) and disagree (34%) that an online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom. However, persons who have taken an online course for a degree program (associate, bachelors, masters or other advanced degree) in the past two years are more likely than those who have not to agree with this statement. Almost one-half (47%) of persons who have taken an online course for a

**Table 1.** Opinions about Education

	<i>Strongly Disagree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Neither</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i>
Getting a college education today is more important than it was 10 years ago.	2%	13%	14%	38%	32%
In order to get ahead in life these days, it's necessary for a person to get a college education.	2	19	14	37	28
I am confident that having a high school diploma can lead to a good job.	5	26	21	36	12
I am confident that having an associate degree (typically a two year degree) can lead to a good job.	1	8	15	62	13
I am confident that having a bachelor's degree (typically a four year degree) can lead to a good job.	1	6	13	54	25
Increasing the number of people who get college degrees is necessary to build a strong economy.	2	18	26	38	15
An online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom.	6	28	30	29	7
Ten years from now, high school students in my community will take most of their classes online.	7	22	31	32	8

degree program in the past two years agree that an online course provides an equal educational value as a course taken in a classroom. Just over one-third (36%) of the recent online course takers disagree with the statement.

When looking ten years into the future, many rural Nebraskans believe high school students in their community will take most of their classes online. Four in ten rural Nebraskans (40%) agree with that statement. Almost three in ten (29%) disagree.

The opinions about education vary by community size, region and various individual attributes (Appendix Table 5). Persons living in or near larger communities are more likely than persons living in or near smaller communities to agree that getting a college education today is more important than it was 10 years ago. Other groups most likely to agree with this statement include females and persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations.

The latter two groups (females and persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations) are the two groups most likely to agree that in order to get ahead in life these days, it's necessary for a person to get a college education.

Persons living in or near smaller communities are more likely than persons living in or near larger communities to agree that they are confident that having a high school diploma can lead to a good job. Just over one-half (54%) of persons living in or near communities with less than 500 people agree with this statement, compared to 41 percent of persons living in or near communities with populations ranging from 5,000 to 9,999.

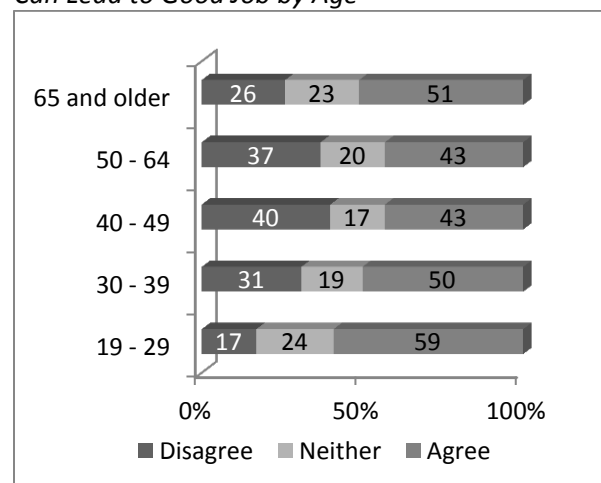
Younger persons are more likely than older persons to agree that having a high school diploma can lead to a good job. Almost six in ten persons age 19 to 29 (59%) agree with this statement, compared to 43 percent of persons age 40 to 64 (Figure 5).

Other groups most likely to agree that they are confident that having a high school diploma can lead to a good job include: persons with lower household incomes, persons with lower education levels and persons with construction, installation or maintenance occupations.

Persons with some college education (but not a four year degree) are more likely than persons with different education levels to agree that they are confident that having an associate degree can lead to a good job. Eighty percent of persons with this level of education agree with the statement, compared to 73 percent of persons with both less and more education.

Other groups most likely to agree with this statement include: persons with higher household incomes; persons with construction, installation or maintenance occupations;

**Figure 5. Confident that High School Diploma Can Lead to Good Job by Age**



persons with occupations in agriculture; and persons with occupations classified as other.

Persons with at least a four year degree are more likely than persons with less education to agree that they are confident that having a bachelor’s degree can lead to a good job. Eighty-five percent of persons with at least a four year degree agree with this statement, compared to 73 percent of persons with a high school diploma or less education.

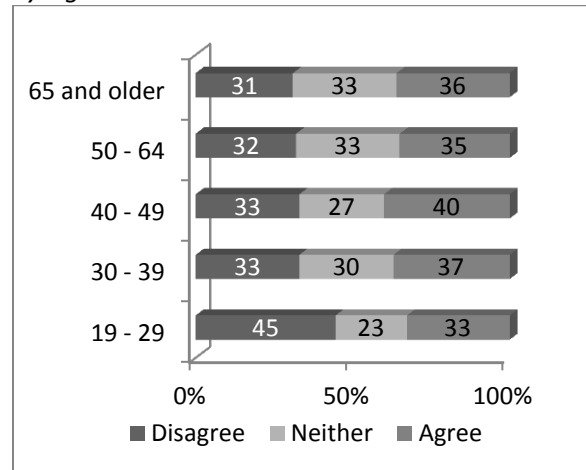
Other groups most likely to agree that having a bachelor’s degree can lead to a good job include persons with the highest household incomes and persons with construction, installation or maintenance occupations.

Females, persons with the highest education levels and persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations are the groups most likely to agree that increasing the number of people who get college degrees is necessary to build a strong economy.

Persons age 40 to 49 are more likely than persons of different ages to agree that an online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom. Forty percent of persons age 40 to 49 agree with this statement, compared to 33 percent of persons age 19 to 29 (Figure 6). The youngest persons are the age group most likely to *disagree* with the statement (45%).

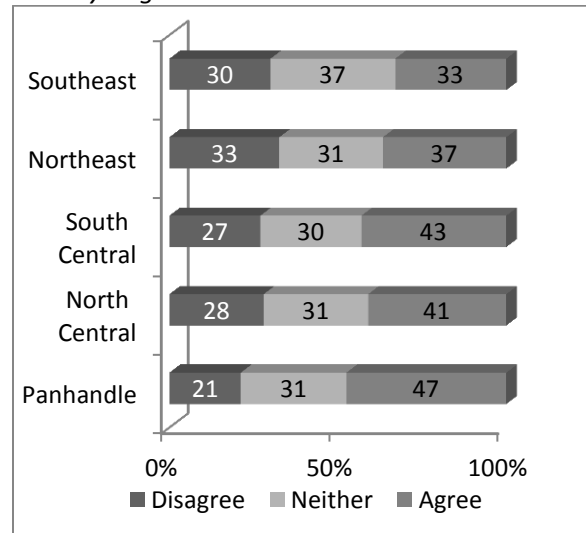
The other groups most likely to agree that an online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom include: persons with the lowest household incomes, females, persons with a high school diploma or less education, persons with sales or office support occupations, and persons with production, transportation or warehousing occupations.

**Figure 6. Online Course Provides Equal Educational Value as Course Taken in Classroom by Age**



Residents of the Panhandle are more likely than residents of other regions of the state to agree that high school students in their community will take most of their classes online ten years from now. Almost one-half (47%) of Panhandle residents agree with this statement, compared to 33 percent of persons living in the Southeast region of the state (Figure 7).

**Figure 7. High School Students in Community Will Take Most Classes Online Ten Years from Now by Region**



The other groups most likely to agree that high school students in their community will take most of their classes online ten years from now include: persons with lower household incomes, persons age 30 to 39, females, persons with some college education (but not a four year degree), persons with food service or personal care occupations, and persons with healthcare support or public safety occupations.

## Conclusion

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Many rural Nebraskans have participated in education or training activities during the past two years. Most of those have taken job-related seminars or workshops. Many have also taken other job-related training including: online webinars, courses for continuing education units and courses for a certification program. Many have also participated in education for their own general interest, including seminars and workshops as well as non-credit courses.

Overall, most rural Nebraskans who have taken education or training are satisfied with both online and traditional in-person delivery methods. However, rural Nebraskans are most satisfied with in-person delivery methods.

Rural Nebraskans believe a college education is important for individuals and for building a strong economy. Seven in ten rural Nebraskans agree that getting a college education today is more important than it was 10 years ago. And, almost two-thirds agree that in order to get ahead in life these days, it's necessary for a person to get a college education. Just over one-half of rural Nebraskans agree that increasing the number of people who get college degrees is necessary to build a strong economy.

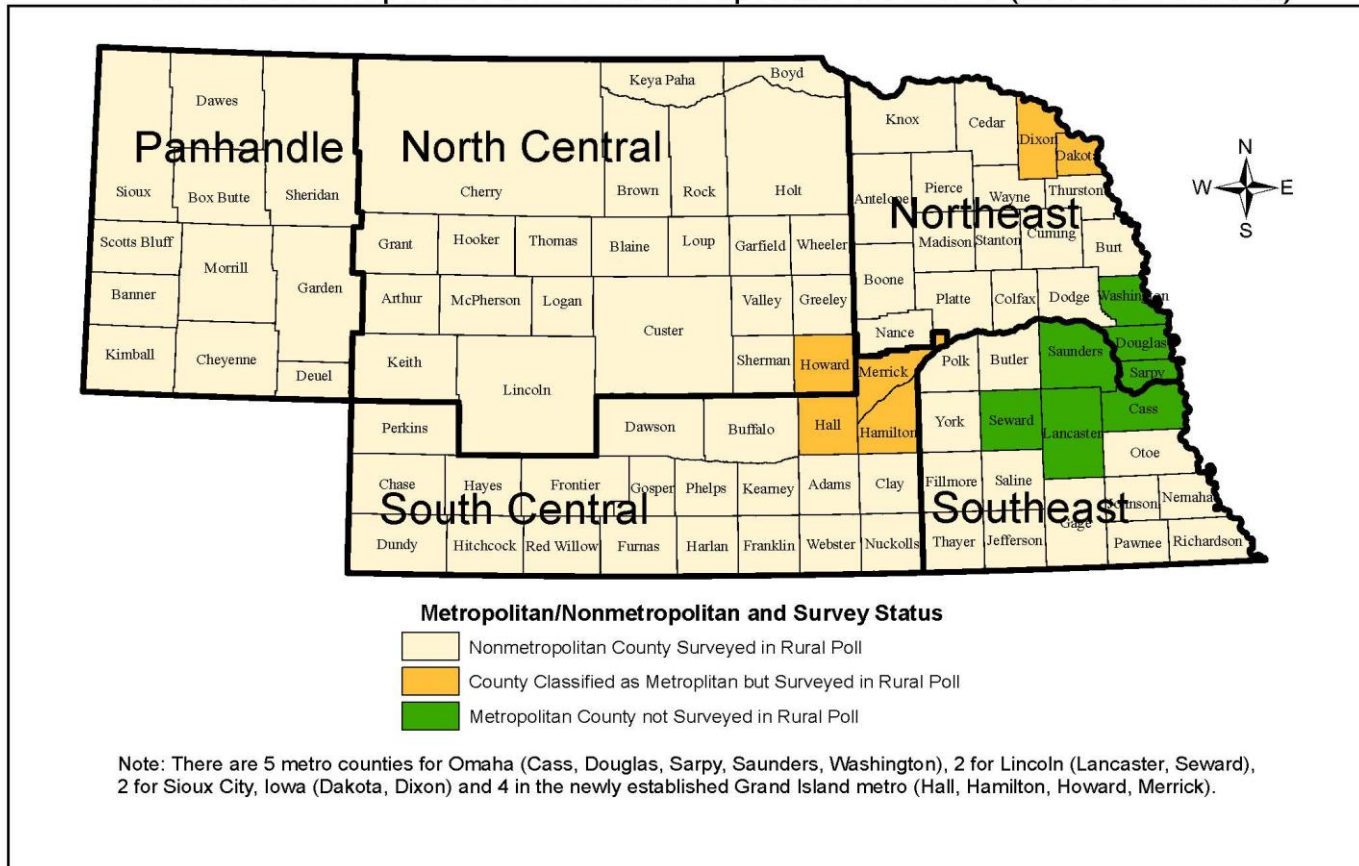
Rural Nebraskans are confident that higher education can lead to a good job. While just under one-half agree that a high school diploma can lead to a good job, at least three-quarters agree that an associate degree or a bachelor's degree can lead to a good job.

Rural Nebraskans have mixed opinions about online education. Almost equal proportions both agree and disagree that an online course provides an equal educational value compared with a course taken in person in a classroom. But, those with experience with such courses (persons who have taken an online course for a degree program in the past two years) are more likely than those who have not to see the value in online education. However, the youngest persons (the ones who would presumably be more familiar with technology and online courses) are the age group most likely to *disagree* with this statement.

When looking ten years into the future, many rural Nebraskans believe high school students in their community will take most of their classes online. Residents of the Panhandle are more likely than residents of other regions of the state to agree with that statement.

**Appendix Figure 1. Regions of Nebraska**

**Nebraska Metropolitan and Nonmetropolitan Counties (2013 Definitions)**



Source: 2013 Metropolitan and Micropolitan Definitions, Office of Management and Budget, released 2-28-13  
 Prepared by: David Drozd, Center for Public Affairs Research, University of Nebraska at Omaha - August 11, 2014