

How Higher Education Strengthens Individual, Family, and Community Well-Being

As lifelong Utahns raising children and grandchildren here, we recognize and share the questions many families and state legislators are asking about higher education. Concerns about rising costs, uncertain career payoff, and aspects of campus culture that feel disconnected from local values are real and deserve attention. Colleges and universities should continue addressing these issues while building stronger, more authentic relationships with the communities they serve.

At the same time, focusing only on higher education's economic contributions or its role in exposing students to diverse political views overlooks another critical dimension that receives far less attention. Higher education shapes awareness of the many issues that allow families and communities to thrive. Decades of national and international research show that educational attainment is closely linked to stronger health and well-being, greater civic and political participation, increased financial stability, and deeper engagement in community life.¹ Recent studies affirm these patterns. The 2026 *State of Higher Education* report from Lumina Foundation and Gallup shows that adults with higher levels of education report greater confidence navigating complex institutions, stronger trust in institutions, and a heightened sense of personal agency.²

Education also shapes how people interpret information, assess risk, and understand social issues. As individuals' education levels increase, their awareness of broader issues tends to expand. They become more attuned to the wide variety of challenges affecting families and children and more supportive of policies and practices that promote safety, stability, and opportunity.³ In this way, education influences not only individual and economic outcomes but also the collective well-being of communities and the broader social fabric of the state. One set of researchers refers to this as community capital, which is the capacity of a community to create conditions that foster opportunity, trust, health, safety, and prosperity for its members. Education strengthens these capacities.⁴

This pattern emerged clearly in the Utah Women & Leadership Project's (UWLP) 2025 statewide survey. Across the 83 items measured, educational attainment was one of the strongest and most consistent predictors of how Utahns view issues related to family well-being, safety, health, civic engagement, and community stability. Whether respondents

were asked about domestic violence, child sexual abuse, poverty and homelessness, political and civic participation, financial security, or the importance of higher education itself, one trend was unmistakable: individuals with higher levels of education demonstrated greater awareness of both the challenges facing Utah families and the opportunities to strengthen communities.

This brief—the second in a two-part series—focuses on the ten non-workplace spokes of the A Bolder Way Forward (BWF) framework.⁵ The first eight workplace spokes were published in a UWLP research and policy titled, The Power of Education: How Higher Education Shapes Utah Workplaces.⁶ By examining how educational attainment shapes Utahns' views on family, safety, health, and civic life, we highlight how education matters for the social and community conditions that help Utahns thrive. Understanding these patterns is essential as Utah continues to strengthen families, reduce violence, improve health outcomes, expand civic participation, and build a more resilient future.

Survey Background

This brief draws on findings from the UWLP's third annual statewide survey, conducted in fall 2025. The survey was designed to capture Utahns' awareness, understanding, and attitudes related to the challenges and opportunities facing women and girls across the state. The study assessed (1) levels of awareness and concern about key issues, (2) attitudes toward topics that shape the experiences of Utah women and families, and (3) variation in perceptions across gender and other demographic characteristics. Additional details on the research design and respondent demographics are available in the five white papers released in early 2026.⁷

The survey instrument included 83 items aligned with the 18 spokes of the BWF framework. Each item was measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Thirteen demographic questions were also included. The survey required approximately 10–20 minutes to complete and received approval from Utah State University's Institutional Review Board. Data were collected between October 1 and November 19, 2025, using two samples: a representative sample of Utah adults obtained through Qualtrics (1,945 completed responses) and a statewide convenience sample gathered through UWLP networks, BWF coalitions, community partners, and targeted

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outreach efforts (3,267 completed responses). In total, 5,212 Utahns participated.

Research Findings

For this brief, we conducted a new analysis examining how educational attainment shapes Utahns' views across the ten BWF spokes that fall outside the traditional workplace—financial security, higher educational attainment, K–12 initiatives, political and civic engagement, health across the lifespan, home and family, child sexual abuse, domestic violence, poverty and homelessness, and sexual assault. The results reveal clear and consistent differences in how people with varying levels of education view these issues. For each category, we include a table summarizing these patterns using an Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), a statistical method that identifies whether respondents having varying educational levels hold meaningfully different views on these topics.⁸ The ten subsections below are presented in alphabetical order.

Overall, higher levels of education were associated with greater awareness of individual, family, and community well-being—including stronger understanding, recognition, and attitudes across a wide range of issues. These patterns appeared among both men and women. However, women generally expressed higher levels of agreement on many items, indicating that they recognized these challenges more strongly than men. Although this brief does not include a dedicated section on gender differences, the first paper in this series provides a detailed analysis of those patterns.⁹

Child Sexual Abuse

Educational attainment was associated with greater awareness and recognition of child sexual abuse and its prevention as a public health issue (see Table 1). This pattern mirrors the broader survey findings: as education levels increased, respondents demonstrated stronger understanding of both the scope of the problem and the importance of community-based prevention. Those with more education were not only more likely to view child sexual abuse as a serious issue within their communities (with mean values increasing significantly, from 4.0 to 4.7), but they also expressed higher agreement that child sexual abuse is preventable. Agreement increased steadily from 5.5 among those with a high school degree or less to 6.1 among those with a graduate degree.

Respondents with more education were increasingly likely to believe that child sexual abuse is more prevalent in Utah than many people recognize, with ratings rising from 4.4 to 5.0. This shows that these respondents could be more attuned to the reality that child sexual abuse often remains hidden, underreported, and misunderstood—particularly in communities where stigma or lack of information limits open discussion. Although increases in awareness were consistent across education groups, gains in confidence about knowing where to find prevention resources were more modest (from 4.8 to 5.1), suggesting that many Utahns—regardless of education—

still need clearer information about where to seek help or guidance. Together, these findings indicate that education strengthens understanding of the problem while highlighting the ongoing need for visible, accessible, and community-supported prevention strategies.

Table 1. Views of Child Sexual Abuse by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Community Problem*	Is Preventable*	More Prevalent in Utah*	Aware of Resources*
High School or Less	4.0	5.5	4.4	4.8
Some College	4.2	5.7	4.6	4.6
Bachelor's Degree	4.4	5.9	4.8	4.9
Graduate Degree	4.7	6.1	5.0	5.1

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Domestic Violence

Higher educational attainment was associated with greater awareness of domestic violence, while producing more modest gains in confidence about community action (see Table 2). Perceptions that domestic violence is a problem in respondents' communities increased from 4.4 among those with a high school education or less to 5.2 among graduate degree holders. Agreement that emotional abuse is as serious as physical abuse rose from 5.8 to 6.3. Awareness of community resources also increased modestly, from 5.1 to 5.4. Confidence in knowing how to take concrete steps to address domestic violence changed relatively little, ranging only from 4.4 to 4.7. Taken together, these results suggest that education shapes how respondents understand domestic violence far more than it shapes how prepared they feel to respond to it. In other words, education helps shape people's understanding of the problem much more than it changes their perceived ability to address it.

Table 2. Views of Domestic Violence by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Community Problem*	Seriousness of Emotional Abuse*	Aware of Resources*	Help Community*
High School or Less	4.4	5.8	5.1	4.7
Some College	4.7	6.1	5.0	4.4
Bachelor's Degree	4.9	6.2	5.2	4.4
Graduate Degree	5.2	6.3	5.4	4.6

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Finances

Educational attainment contributed not only to greater financial literacy but also to increased confidence in managing personal financial decisions (see Table 3). Respondents with more education were more likely to report awareness of available financial resources, with values rising from 4.6 to 5.3. Utilization of those resources also increased, from 4.1 to 5.0. Larger differences appeared in financial knowledge and confidence. Belief in understanding one's personal finances increased from 5.6 among respondents with a high school education or less to 6.7 among those with a graduate degree. Confidence in managing personal finances and improving financial well-being rose from 5.1 to 6.0.

Table 3. Views of Finances by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Aware of Re-sources*	Utilized Re-sources*	Under-stand Fi-nances*	Improve Financial Wellness*
High School or Less	4.6	4.1	5.6	5.1
Some College	4.6	4.2	6.1	5.4
Bachelor's Degree	5.0	4.6	6.5	5.7
Graduate Degree	5.3	5.0	6.7	6.0

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Health Across the Lifespan

Educational attainment was consistently associated with greater confidence in navigating healthcare and making informed health decisions (see Table 4). Respondents with more education were increasingly likely to believe they could schedule and complete a preventive healthcare visit within the next 12 months, with average ratings rising from 5.1 among those with a high school education or less to 6.5 among those with a graduate degree. Confidence in making reproductive health decisions also increased from 5.1 to 6.0. Knowledge of perimenopause rose modestly, from 4.6 to 5.0. Respondents with higher levels of education were also more confident that healthcare providers would appropriately screen them for intimate partner violence, with ratings increasing from 4.9 to 5.7. These findings suggest that education enhances individuals' confidence in navigating healthcare systems and making informed health decisions.

Table 4. Views of Health Across the Lifespan by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Schedule Preven-tive Visit*	Reproduc-tive Health Decisions*	Perimeno-pause Knowledge*	Screen for IPV*
High School or Less	5.1	5.1	4.6	4.9
Some College	5.7	5.4	4.7	5.1

Bachelor's Degree	6.2	5.8	4.8	5.5
Graduate Degree	6.5	6.0	5.0	5.7

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Higher Education

Unsurprisingly, educational attainment reinforced positive attitudes toward the value and accessibility of higher education itself (see Table 5). Respondents with higher levels of education were more likely to view college as valuable for intellectual growth, personal development, and lifelong contributions to society, with values increasing from 5.2 to 6.5. Agreement that college is worth the financial investment rose from 4.5 to 5.9. Support for increasing the number of Utah women completing a graduate degree also increased steadily, from 4.8 among respondents with a high school education or less to 5.9 among those with a graduate degree. Likewise, support for encouraging prospective students to complete the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) increased from 5.1 to 5.7.

Table 5. Views of Higher Education by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Important for Growth*	Worth Invest-ment*	Women Graduate Degrees*	Apply for Financial Aid*
High School or Less	5.2	4.5	4.8	5.1
Some College	5.7	4.8	5.1	5.3
Bachelor's Degree	6.2	5.5	5.5	5.5
Graduate Degree	6.5	5.9	5.9	5.7

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Home & Family

Higher educational attainment is associated with more egalitarian attitudes toward family decision making and intimate relationships. Educational attainment was linked with more equitable perceptions of family relationships and household responsibilities (see Table 6). Respondents with higher levels of education were increasingly likely to report that they and their partners had equal opportunities to express their views during conflict, with ratings rising from 4.9 to 5.9. This pattern suggests that education may shape the ways individuals interpret communication dynamics and approach shared decision making within relationships.

Perceptions that domestic labor and caregiving responsibilities were shared fairly remained relatively stable but increased slightly across educational groups (from 4.7 to 4.9 and 4.8 to 4.9, respectively), indicating modest but consistent movement toward more balanced views of household roles. These small increases align with broader survey trends showing that higher educational attainment is associated with greater awareness of equity-related issues, even when changes in personal

confidence or behavior are more limited. In contrast, agreement that a partner's sexual needs should take priority declined from 4.1 among respondents with a high school education or less to 3.5 among those with a graduate degree.

Table 6. Views of Home & Family by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Express Views with Partner*	Domestic Labor Is Shared*	Caregiving Is Shared*	Partner's Sexual Needs*
High School or Less	4.9	4.7	4.8	4.1
Some College	5.2	4.6	4.6	3.9
Bachelor's Degree	5.7	4.8	4.8	3.6
Graduate Degree	5.9	4.9	4.9	3.5

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

K-12 Initiatives

Respondents with higher educational attainment consistently expressed stronger support for educational opportunities that prepare girls for future success (see Table 7). Agreement that girls should develop strong math skills increased from 5.3 to 6.2. Support for girls completing Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways also rose from 5.1 to 5.8. Belief that girls should complete advanced coursework that prepares them for college and careers showed one of the strongest educational effects, increasing from 5.4 to 6.7. Concern about chronic school absenteeism likewise increased substantially from 5.4 to 6.5.

Table 7. Views of K-12 by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Girls' Math Skills*	Girls Complete CTE*	Prepare Girls for Careers*	Absent Children*
High School or Less	5.3	5.1	5.4	5.4
Some College	5.7	5.6	6.0	6.0
Bachelor's Degree	6.1	5.8	6.5	6.2
Graduate Degree	6.2	5.8	6.7	6.5

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Political & Civic Engagement

Educational attainment was strongly associated with positive attitudes toward women's civic and political participation (see Table 8). As education increased, respondents became less likely to believe that a woman's participation in politics would negatively affect her family. Average ratings declined from 3.4 among those with a high school education or less to 2.6 among respondents with a graduate degree. At the same time,

respondents with higher levels of education expressed stronger agreement that women are well suited for elected office, with ratings increasing from 5.4 to 6.4. Civic awareness also rose steadily, with knowledge of how to become involved in civic activities increasing from 4.5 to 5.5, while reported community engagement increased from 4.6 to 5.7.

Table 8. Views of Political & Civic Representation by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Negative Effect on Family*	Women Well Suited for Politics*	Aware of Civic Activities*	Engaged in Community*
High School or Less	3.4	5.4	4.5	4.6
Some College	3.0	5.9	4.9	5.0
Bachelor's Degree	2.8	6.3	5.3	5.5
Graduate Degree	2.6	6.4	5.5	5.7

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Poverty & Homelessness

Educational attainment was associated with less emphasis on individual-choice explanations for poverty and homelessness (see Table 9). Respondents with more education were less likely to believe that poverty results primarily from an individual's own choices. Average ratings declined from 3.5 among respondents with a high school education or less to 2.6 among those with a graduate degree. Similar declines occurred for beliefs about homelessness, falling from 3.5 to 2.7. Respondents with more education were also less likely to believe there was little they could do to address poverty and homelessness, with ratings declining from 3.9 to 3.1. At the same time, agreement that the home environment is the first step that enables children and families to thrive in the future increased from 5.5 to 6.2.

Table 9. Views of Poverty & Homelessness by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Poverty Is Own Choice*	Homeless Is Own Choice*	Not Much I Can Do*	Home Is First Step*
High School or Less	3.5	3.5	3.9	5.5
Some College	3.1	3.2	3.5	5.9
Bachelor's Degree	2.8	3.0	3.4	6.1
Graduate Degree	2.6	2.7	3.1	6.2

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Sexual Assault

Educational attainment was associated with greater awareness of sexual assault and stronger confidence in available

community resources (see Table 10). Respondents with higher levels of education were progressively less likely to believe that sexual assault is *not* a problem in Utah, with ratings declining from 3.1 among those with a high school education or less to 2.1 among holders of a graduate degree. Agreement that there was little individuals could do to address sexual assault in their communities also declined from 3.8 to 3.2. Awareness of available sexual assault resources increased modestly from 4.7 to 5.0. One item showed little variation across educational groups: respondents consistently agreed that any unwanted sexual contact constitutes sexual assault, with ratings remaining near 5.9 regardless of educational level. Together, these findings suggest that education strengthens awareness of sexual assault while increasing confidence that communities can respond effectively.

Table 10. Views of Sexual Assault by Educational Attainment

(N=4,905; 1 = Strongly Disagree; 7 = Strongly Agree)

Level of Education	Not a Problem in Utah*	Unwanted Sexual Contact	Not Much I Can Do*	Aware of Resources*
High School or Less	3.1	5.8	3.8	4.7
Some College	2.6	5.9	3.5	4.5
Bachelor's Degree	2.4	5.9	3.4	4.8
Graduate Degree	2.1	5.9	3.2	5.0

*Columns marked with an asterisk are statistically significant at $p < .05$.

Policy Implications

The findings of this study suggest that educational attainment is not simply a workforce or economic development issue. It is also a powerful community development strategy. Across nearly every outcome we examined, respondents with higher levels of education demonstrated greater awareness of challenges facing families and stronger confidence in navigating social institutions. These patterns are suggestive. Investments in education are likely to improve community well-being by strengthening people’s capacity to recognize local needs and participate in finding meaningful solutions.

The results also highlight an important distinction between awareness and action. While education consistently increased respondents’ recognition of issues such as domestic violence, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, and poverty and homelessness, it produced more modest gains in confidence about how to respond to many of these challenges. This finding suggests that education alone is insufficient. Awareness must be accompanied by local resources, practical skills, and community leadership. These findings point toward several policy priorities for state and local governments.

Investments in education are likely to improve community well-being by strengthening people’s capacity to recognize local needs and participate in finding meaningful solutions.

First, continue expanding educational opportunity as a long-term community investment. State leaders should continue investing in policies that increase educational attainment for all members of the population as a whole. These should include expanding access through dual-enrollment opportunities, FAFSA completion initiatives, and need-based financial aid; strengthening degree-completion pathways for adult and non-traditional students through flexible scheduling, credit for prior learning, and transfer partnerships; and supporting stackable certificates and workforce credentials that allow individuals to build skills and continue their education over time.

Second, strengthen community response capacity through training and resource awareness. The findings suggest that educational attainment increases awareness of issues such as domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and sexual assault more than it increases confidence in responding to them. Likewise, across domains such as financial security, healthcare, domestic violence, child sexual abuse, and sexual assault, many respondents reported only moderate awareness of available community resources. These findings indicate that awareness alone is insufficient. State and local governments should find ways to expand evidence-based intervention programs, community response training, and public education campaigns. They should also simultaneously increase the visibility and accessibility of available resources, so residents know where to seek help before crises occur. Local governments, schools, libraries, healthcare providers, and community organizations are well positioned to deliver many of these programs and to connect residents with the services they need.

Third, and perhaps most important, cultivate three-way partnerships that include higher education institutions, local government, and community residents. These stakeholders can facilitate formal partnerships in which students, faculty, non-profit organizations, neighborhood associations, and public agencies work together to identify and address community needs. These collaborations could include community-based research projects, service-learning courses, neighborhood leadership opportunities, public health initiatives, financial literacy programs, violence prevention campaigns, and youth councils where students help contribute to practical solutions to local problems. Universities and municipalities could partner to establish internships that place college students within city and county agencies to work on issues related to housing, health, public safety, transportation, education, and family well-being. In doing so, higher education becomes a pathway to employment as well as a catalyst for long-term public problem solving.

Conclusion

This study broadens the conversation about the value of higher education and documents its individual and communal assets. Too often, debates focus on tuition costs, workforce preparation, or political and cultural disagreements. While these issues deserve thoughtful attention, they address only part of higher education’s role in the lives of Utahns. The

findings presented here suggest that educational attainment also shapes how people understand their communities, navigate institutions, and engage in civic life. Across nearly every outcome we examined, respondents with higher levels of education demonstrated greater awareness of the issues that influence individual, family, and community well-being.

One important pattern emerged across several domains: educational attainment increased awareness of community challenges more consistently than confidence in how to address them. This distinction suggests that while education builds civic understanding, communities must also invest in practical training, leadership development, and accessible resources that enable residents to translate awareness into meaningful action.

Taken together, these findings indicate that higher education is not only an investment in human capital but also an investment in community capital. Communities rely on people who

can identify problems, work across institutional boundaries, and contribute to collective solutions. Every additional certificate, degree, or educational credential has the potential to strengthen labor market outcomes and the social fabric of neighborhoods, schools, and workplaces. When educational opportunities expand, communities gain members who are more likely to recognize local needs and participate in civic life.

Utah's long-term future depends on the skills of its workforce *and* on the strength of its citizens and communities. Efforts to expand educational opportunities while creating pathways for civic engagement, community leadership, and public problem-solving will generate benefits that extend beyond the classroom or workplace. Higher education prepares students to become informed citizens and increasingly engaged neighbors and contributors to families and communities that thrive.

¹ Madsen, S. R., Hanewicz, C., & Thackeray, S. (2010, January 26). *The value of higher education for women in Utah*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/1-value-of-higher-education.pdf>

² Gallup. (2026). *State of higher education 2026: Valued but out of reach—The reality of higher education today*. Lumina Foundation & Gallup. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/644939/state-of-higher-education.aspx>

³ Brandley, A. T., & Berlin, M. (2026, March). *The benefits of higher education to Utah*. Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute. <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/HigherEd-PB-Mar2026.pdf>

⁴ Flora, C. B., Flora, J. L., & Gasteyer, S. P. (2016). *Rural communities: Legacy and change* (4th ed.). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429494697>

⁵ See www.abolderwayforward.org to learn more about the framework and efforts.

⁶ Madsen, S. R., & Dahlin, E. (2026, August 6). *The power of education: How higher education shapes Utah workplaces*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/briefs/73-power-of-education-2026.pdf>

⁷ Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2026, January 8). *Women in the workplace in 2025: Utahns' awareness, understanding, and attitudes*. Utah Women & Leadership Project. <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/files/wp/no-20.pdf>; Madsen, S. R., & Townsend, A. (2026, January 22). *Women in the workplace: Entrepreneurship, workforce development,*

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⁸ For more information about the survey, see <https://www.usu.edu/uwlp/blog/2025/2025-fall-survey>.

⁹ Madsen, S. R., & Dahlin, E. (2026, August 6).

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