

Social & Taxpayer Perspectives

State and local taxpayers earn a 2.1% rate of return on their investment in Halifax Community College. The college reduces the demand for social services and recovers a significant portion of the costs borne by taxpayers. The return on investment is considered from two perspectives: social and taxpayer.

Social Perspective

The social perspective adds up all benefits attributable to HCC, regardless of recipient, and compares the total to the original investment made. This is called the “benefit/cost ratio.” If the ratio is less than 1.0, the investment is not worthwhile; if it is greater, the investment is considered sound.

For example, a transportation authority might justify a new road by showing that savings in travel time and vehicle expenses accrued by thousands of drivers exceed the project’s cost. Public parks are justified by showing that recreation, scenic, and other values enjoyed by park users exceed the cost of park infrastructure, operation, and the net value of the park’s land and resources not used for other purposes. So the social perspective counts all benefits, not just those that accrue back to state or local government.

Benefits generated by HCC also accrue to different groups. Students benefit from higher incomes, employers benefit from increased worker productivity, and the public at large benefits from an expanded economic base. The public also enjoys a variety of external social benefits, such as reduced crime, lower welfare and unemployment, improved health, and less absenteeism from work. All of these are tallied up and compared to the investment made by state and local governments, or the taxpayers. A social perspective benefit/cost ratio greater than 1.0 is a minimal indicator of a worthwhile public investment.

Counting benefits and costs in this way, HCC’s benefit/cost ratio is 11.0. In other words, the cumulative added value attached to each dollar invested will have a present value of \$11.00 by the end of the students’ working career.

Taxpayer Perspective

The taxpayer investment perspective counts only benefits that can be entered into the books of state and local governments. For example, educated workers earn more and thus pay more taxes. Furthermore, because state and local governments bear part of the cost of crime, their budgets benefit from education’s crime-reducing effect, and the same is true for other benefits of an educated populace. The bottom line: state and local governments receive returns from their support of HCC in the form of increased tax revenue and savings associated with avoided social costs.

Worthwhile public projects often generate negative taxpayer perspective returns, because the role of government is to provide services that the public wants but that the business sector may find unprofitable. Considerable funds are spent on public parks, for example, yet they yield little or no direct return. From a taxpayer perspective, returns are negative, though the park is justified by the benefits tracked under the social perspective.

The benefits generated by HCC and its students recover 90% of the costs of supporting the college. This eases the burden on taxpayers and is indicative of a good public investment given that many government projects do not yield any returns.

