

USU UWLP Research Shows Higher Ed Strengthens Individual, Family, and Community Well#Being

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The Utah State University [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) (UWLP) released a new research and policy brief, [How Higher Education Strengthens Individual, Family, and Community Well#Being](#), offering a comprehensive analysis of how educational attainment shapes Utahns' awareness, attitudes, and expectations across 10 key areas of community life.

The brief is the second in a two#part series drawing on findings from UWLP's third annual statewide survey, completed by more than 5,200 Utahns. While the first brief examined how education influences workplace culture and opportunity, the new report focuses on the 10 non#workplace topics, or spokes, of the [A Bolder Way Forward](#) (BWF) initiative, including family well#being, safety, health, civic engagement, K–12 education, poverty and homelessness, and financial security.

“Higher education does far more than prepare people for jobs,” said Susan R. Madsen, founding director of UWLP and coauthor of the report. “It expands how people understand the world, how they interpret information, and how they recognize the issues that shape family and community well#being. As education levels rise, awareness of challenges increases—and so does support for solutions.”

Education Shapes Awareness Across Community Issues

Across all 10 spokes analyzed, educational attainment emerged as one of the strongest predictors of how Utahns view issues affecting families and communities.

Respondents with higher levels of education consistently demonstrated:

- Greater awareness of community challenges, including domestic violence, child sexual abuse, sexual assault, poverty, and homelessness.
 - Stronger recognition of equity#related issues, including family dynamics, caregiving roles, and K–12 preparation for girls.
 - Higher confidence navigating complex systems, such as healthcare, financial decision#making, and civic engagement.
 - More supportive attitudes toward policies and practices that promote safety, stability, and opportunity for Utah families.
- “These patterns appeared among both men and women,” said coauthor Eric Dahlin, professor of sociology at Brigham Young University. “But women consistently reported higher levels of concern and awareness, even at the same education levels as men. Education elevates understanding—but gendered experiences still shape how people see the world.”

Key Findings Across the 10 BWF Spokes

The brief highlights statistically significant differences across educational groups in areas such as:

1. **Child Sexual Abuse:** Higher education was associated with stronger recognition of prevalence, preventability, and the need for community#based prevention.
2. **Domestic Violence:** Awareness increased with education, though confidence in knowing how to respond changed only modestly.
3. **Finances:** Education strengthened financial literacy, confidence, and use of financial resources.
4. **Health Across the Lifespan:** Respondents with more education reported greater confidence navigating healthcare and making informed health decisions.
5. **Higher Education Attainment:** Those with higher levels of education were significantly more likely to view college as valuable, worth the investment, and essential for expanding opportunities for Utah women and families.
6. **Home and Family:** Higher education was linked to more open attitudes toward communication, decision#making, and caregiving.
7. **K–12 Initiatives:** Support for preparing girls for future careers—including math, CTE pathways,

and advanced coursework—increased with education.

8. **Political and Civic Engagement:** Education strengthened civic awareness, community engagement, and confidence in women's political leadership.
9. **Poverty and Homelessness:** Higher education reduced individual#choice explanations and increased recognition of structural factors.
10. **Sexual Assault:** Education heightened awareness of sexual assault and increased confidence in available resources.

Policy Implications for Utah

The brief outlines several policy priorities for strengthening Utah communities:

- Expand educational opportunity as a long#term investment in community well#being.
 - Strengthen community response capacity through training, resource visibility, and evidence#based intervention programs.
 - Cultivate partnerships among higher education institutions, local governments, and community organizations to address local needs collaboratively.
- "As Utah continues to navigate rapid economic change, workforce needs, and persistent gender disparities, these findings offer a roadmap for policymakers and community leaders," Madsen said. "Education is a powerful force, but it must be paired with organizational and policy reforms to create outcomes that benefit all Utahns."

The [Utah Women & Leadership Project](#) strengthens the impact of Utah girls and women through research, resources, and statewide engagement. Its premier initiative – [A Bolder Way Forward](#) – creates opportunities for Utahns to learn, collaborate, and drive meaningful change across 18 areas of focus. For more information, visit the UWLP website at utwomen.org. The UWLP is affiliated with [USU Extension](#).

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