

Lake Research

TO: Dave Merkowitz
American Council on Education

FROM: Celinda Lake and Alysia Snell
Lake Research, Inc.

RE: Proposed Research

DATE: September 26, 1996

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this proposal to conduct research for the American Council on Education. We are very excited about the prospect of working with you on this timely and interesting project. We believe we can make an important contribution to your efforts and would very much welcome the opportunity to do so.

Lake Research is uniquely positioned for this project. We have recently completed work with two organizations looking at the issue of affirmative action and how to position the issue to voters. Moreover, we have done extensive work for other issue clients and political campaigns on this issue, including the Center for Policy Alternatives, National Women's Law Center, The Glass Ceiling Commission, and American Association of University Women. We also know that you have a special interest in California. We have looked extensively at affirmative action in that state on initiative and previously for our candidate, Delaine Eastin.

Affirmative action is a complicated and value-laden subject for American voters. Voters, especially women, are conflicted about the issue because they see problems with the current system of "ensuring equal opportunity for all" but solidly oppose scrapping the system altogether. Both of these projects focused primarily on affirmative action in the workplace and only briefly touched on affirmative action in higher education. In this work we found that voters are very defensive of higher education and do not want to give any group an advantage over another when it comes to getting an education. Most voters see education as the gateway to a better life and they do not want quotas set on who will be admitted to college. They are willing to take extra remedial efforts in early education, but want college education to be based on merit. Moreover, they can readily imagine people in power discriminating in the workplace particularly in times of downsizing, but can't picture where systematic discrimination would occur in higher education. We agree that more work needs to be conducted to fully understand voters' views on this issue. We also need to explore and disaggregate the issues of admission, financial aid, and advancement.

We worked with the Equal Rights Advocates in California to explore ways to defeat the California Civil Rights Initiative. We found in this work that voters like CCRI and perceive this initiative to give everyone an equal and fair chance, something they do not think they get now. It is difficult to move voters from their initial impression of this initiative and most would like to see the elimination of affirmative action. It is only after they talk about eliminating it per se that many agree we cannot afford to get rid of it at this point. They have second thoughts about taking off the controls that have offered some protection to women in the past and they worry that if these controls are removed then we will go back to the days of "good old boys" and backroom deals for hiring. Thus there is some energy to the concept of reforming, not eliminating affirmative action.

Californians are acutely aware that college in their state has become much more expensive and competitive. White voters believe Asians in the state are getting all of the scholarships and spots in universities because of affirmative action policies which increases their resentment about affirmative action in scholarships and college placement. Because voters have much trust in education as the real route to equal opportunity, they deeply resent set asides in higher education. This is where the leveling process is supposed to occur and middle class Californians believe they can no longer send their children to school.

We also conducted research for the National Affirmative Action Consortium. As part of this research effort we conducted focus groups among white women in several cities to explore the keys to developing winning messages on affirmative action. A second group was conducted using dial technology to refine potential messages. In these groups we found that gaining the support of white women is key to building a majority or plurality for affirmative action, but it will not be easy. We also found that women view quotas in higher education even more harshly, because a system which is supposed to be entirely on merit (SAT scores and grades) punishes their children for being white. Additionally, the whole idea of affirmative action is much more accepted in the workplace than in college or university admissions. Whereas voters view education as an area particularly well-suited for decisions based on merit, they currently believe many workplace hiring and promotions decisions are made arbitrarily. In addition, voters are particularly protective of their children when it comes to affirmative action. They believe decisions about what college their child attends will affect his or her ability to get ahead and they do not want to support any policy which may put their child at a disadvantage in this very competitive economic climate.

In addition to this work we have explored the issue of affirmative action in a study we did on Women's Voices for the Center for Policy Alternatives. There we found repeated questions about changes in other areas of the workplace made voters more receptive to looking positively at affirmative action. We also found that describing the programs as allowing equal opportunity to compete changed the framing. Voters across the board supported this and thought competition implied individual merit and not quotas. We also worked for Colorado Affirmative Action and we have tested it for numerous candidates, including Harvey Gantt in North Carolina and Kathleen Brown in California.

Lake Research also has extensive experience working in the area of education. Our work in this area has been sophisticated, innovative, and successful. Numerous associations, issue-based organizations, corporations, and candidates have called upon us to help understand people's perceptions of our education system and develop strategies to better communicate with citizens about the issues facing our education systems.

In 1993 and 1994 we conducted national work for the American Association of School Administrators. This research was of a broad scope, using focus groups and a national survey to assess people's attitudes on the state of our schools, the effect of larger national trends on attitudes about education, and assess the impact of the far right on people's perceptions of our public school system, including analysis of the voucher alternative. We found that Americans today face conflicting emotions toward the nation's schools. The media tells them one thing about schools, their personal experience tells them another. On the surface, these conflicting views appear to result in a "schools are terrible, but mine's okay" mentality (except in urban areas). Searching deeper, however, people do not have just one view of schools, or just a local v. national view of schools. They have a complex set of opinions that changes based on the demographics of a school district.

In addition, we have provided research and strategy for efforts in Colorado and in California to defeat school choice initiatives. Along with working with the National Education Association on a number of issues, we have also worked for teachers' associations in numerous states including Texas, Maryland, Michigan, California, and Colorado. We also conduct education related work for the American Association of University Women (AAUW). In addition we have extensive experience on children's issues, having conducted research for the Coalition for America's Children, Kid's Count, Children NOW, and the Children's Defense Fund, among others.

Methodology -- Focus Groups

This kind of qualitative research provides a rich, textured appraisal of people's attitudes. Focus groups are structured but open-ended discussions which permit the exploration of thought processes at a deeper level than does quantitative research. In essence, they are idea generators. These groups allow us to explore participants' concerns in their own words; determine their intensity of interest; and discover the sources of their ideas and opinions. They also help to insure that we are asking the right questions in the right ways on our polls. But because focus groups cannot be projected onto a larger universe, they are not a substitute for survey work. Rather they are a powerful aid and supplement.

Our focus groups explore the rich texture, language, and emotions of people's perceptions. They go below the surface views identified by surveys and show how people put ideas together and think about things. The groups explore the often subtle and hidden stereotypes and assumptions that people have. Our analysis of these strata of opinions helps us to choose the most salient messages to test in a survey, the framing of these messages, the symbols and language to use, and the linkages to make with broader views and attitudes.

We strongly believe that our focus groups are better than the competition's because our attention to group dynamics is unmatched by any other firm. We believe in separating male and female respondents and racial groups in order to insure the most open and honest discussions. We also racially and gender match our moderators to the groups, which again allows for a more open discussion. With a trained moderator following detailed, written guidelines, audio and video taping, an additional on-site analyst, and with an in-depth pattern analysis of the transcripts, we are able to explore people's perceptions and their attitudes at levels at which other firms do not. We spend as much time on our focus group guidelines as most other firms do on their survey questionnaires.

An open-ended discussion guide will be prepared by Lake Research, Inc. in conjunction with your organization. Information will be elicited from respondents in a variety of ways. In some instances, direct open-ended questions will be employed. At other points in the discussion, projective techniques will be utilized. While these discussions will generally follow the agreed upon guide, their strength is in their open-ended nature. The moderator will keep the discussion relevant but, to work, these groups must be free-flowing. This allows us to follow respondents' own thought patterns on their own terms, instead of forcing them into our collective framework.

We recommend conducting 4 to 6 focus groups, depending on how many your budget will allow. We envision these groups being made up of 2 groups of white college educated voters, 2 groups of white non-college educated voters, 1 group of mixed gender African Americans, and 1 group of Hispanic women or some combination of the above. We would also recommend that at least half of each group have kids under 18. We also recommend recruiting the attentive public for these groups in order to get the people who are paying more attention and therefore may be more the audience for Presidents' of colleges. We could also more narrowly define some groups in order to get closer to the audiences for colleges, such as a group of parents of high school and college students. If your budget allows we would also recommend conducting either an elite focus group among media people or one-on-one interviews among the media. We would like to have a broader discussion with you before determining exact locations, but we foresee the locations embracing 1 locale where there is good public higher education system offered at a reasonable cost and 1 locale where there is a good private school education system. We will, of course, share with you experiences we have had in locations throughout the US, and along with your expertise on the issue, make our determinations. Each focus group will be composed of as many as 8-10 people recruited according to criteria that we collectively agree upon. Complete transcripts and audiotapes of the session will be provided to you.

Research Design and Costs

We wanted to outline for you what we see as the various components of the research process. This outline can, of course, be revised based on your needs, your suggestions, and your budget.

As we see it, our research effort has four primary goals:

1. Determine which values are embodied in higher education, how voters define affirmative action, and find the language they use when talking about affirmative action in association with higher education.
2. Determine how much of a threat voters view affirmative action when it comes to higher education.
3. Determine which messages work best with these groups, what information we can use to sway them, and the best spokesperson for delivering this message.
4. Develop a strategy for communicating and implementing the findings.

In order to meet these objectives and to meet the needs of the American Council on Education, Lake Research would propose conducting six focus groups.

1 group of non-college educated men	} <i>white</i>	\$5,000] <i>Phase 1</i>
1 group of non-college educated women		\$5,000	
1 group of college educated men		\$5,000	
1 group of college educated women		\$5,000	
1 group mixed gender African Americans	\$6,500		
1 group of Hispanic women	\$6,500		
1 group of media		\$6,500	
OR			
1-on-1 interviews among media**			\$250/interview

Focus groups are generally conducted in pairs. Costs among minority participants is slightly more due to higher costs for moderation, for recruitment, and for participation. Costs for focus groups include recruitment, guidelines development, moderator, audiotaping, transcription, analysis, and presentation. If there are budget constraints, we can rework our proposal to fit your needs. We should stress that there is no need to sign off on any of these plans at this or any other point. Hiring Lake Research puts you under no obligation to conduct any of this research.

The only additional charges are for travel, sample for the focus groups (if we have to order it), phone, overnight shipping, and messenger charges incurred on behalf of The American

Council on Education, which are billed at cost. Seventy-five percent of the cost of the project is due before the research begins and the remainder is due upon delivery of results.

**The cost for one-on-one interviews among media elite does not include travel to the interview if conducted in person or the cost of communication charges if conducted by phone. These charges will be billed at cost.

We would love the opportunity to work with you on this project. Please feel free to call with any questions you may have or for any additional information you may need.

group of 10 (ages 30-55)

3 - have kids in college (or recently enrolled)

3 - " age 15-19

exclude teachers, govt. employees

Northeast

- * Baltimore (1st)
- * Philly
- Pittsburgh
- Cherry Hill, NJ
- * Paramus, NJ
- White Plains, NY
- Hartford, CT

Midwest

- Detroit
- * Chicago
- * Cincinnati (2nd)