

PUBLIC
CONFIDENCE
IN HIGHER
EDUCATION

AGB ASSOCIATION OF
GOVERNING BOARDS
OF UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES

The
Guardians
Initiative™

Reclaiming the Public Trust

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The Guardians Initiative: Reclaiming the Public Trust™

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The Guardians Initiative™

Reclaiming the Public Trust

A number of recent reports—some from partisan sources, others from well-regarded independent surveyors such as the Pew and Gallup organizations—suggest that public trust in colleges and universities has declined. In today’s politically fraught climate, such reports understandably alarm college and university board members and other higher education leaders. On closer inspection, however, public attitudes on higher education are more complex, nuanced, and, in some respects, positive than many reports say. There is indeed evidence of diminished public trust in higher education, but the evidence is mixed, its reliability unclear, and its interpretation debatable. Still, many thought leaders sense a decline in public trust in higher education and point to developments such as the first federal tax on some university endowments and continued declines in state funding of public universities as worrisome signs. The issue calls for board members’ attention and response.

Executive Summary

Public confidence, or trust, in higher education measures the general public's perception of whether colleges and universities fulfill their missions.

Does the public trust the knowledge that the institutions impart and the research that they conduct? Does the public believe graduates have learned to think critically and independently, or does it think graduates were ideologically indoctrinated? The U.S. higher education system, which is composed of institutions that depend on government funding yet traditionally enjoy considerable independence, relies on public trust.

Few of the many surveys of views on higher education are longitudinal. Thus, it is difficult to determine whether certain aspects of the results reflect a downward trend. In addition, survey questions often focus on the economic value of higher education rather than public trust. Nonetheless, survey data, overall, reveal that:

- In absolute terms, public confidence in the quality of higher education institutions is high.
- Views of higher education compare favorably with views of most other U.S. institutions, with overall confidence in colleges and universities near the top of all institutions.
- Surveys show a partisan gap in confidence, and that this gap has increased lately.
- Public concerns surface largely in response to questions related to economic return on investment—a measure distinct from public trust. These concerns can be refuted empirically, as AGB's 2017 briefing, *Return on Investment in College Education*, shows.

Survey data suggest ample opportunity for board members to advance a positive narrative. For example, they can:

- Explain misconceptions related to the business model and the return on investment of higher education;
- Encourage reporting of positive experiences of students and benefits of research; and
- Engage in dialogue on increased access to higher education and preparation of students for career success.

What Is Public Confidence?

Many surveys measure views of students and employers, but this paper focuses on the general public's views, for two reasons. First, the public includes those who, through their vote, decide whether to elect legislators and other leaders responsible for government spending on higher education. Second, students and employers are likely to focus on their own experiences (e.g., whether they would enroll again) while a survey of the general public captures more broadly how colleges and universities are perceived.

Public confidence, which is distinct from the economic value of higher education, is not easy to gauge. Surveys of it attempt to measure feelings or attitudes. Some respondents might consider whether they trust the competency and knowledge of graduates. Do they trust the work of lawyers, engineers, and other professionals? Media reports may influence survey responses as well. Are respondents more likely to recall a story about the daughter of immigrants who was first in her family to attend college or another about graduates burdened with debt?

The variety of higher education institutions and the difficulty of measuring whether they are fulfilling their missions further complicate overall measurement of public confidence. Most surveys treat higher education as a single entity, but respondents likely

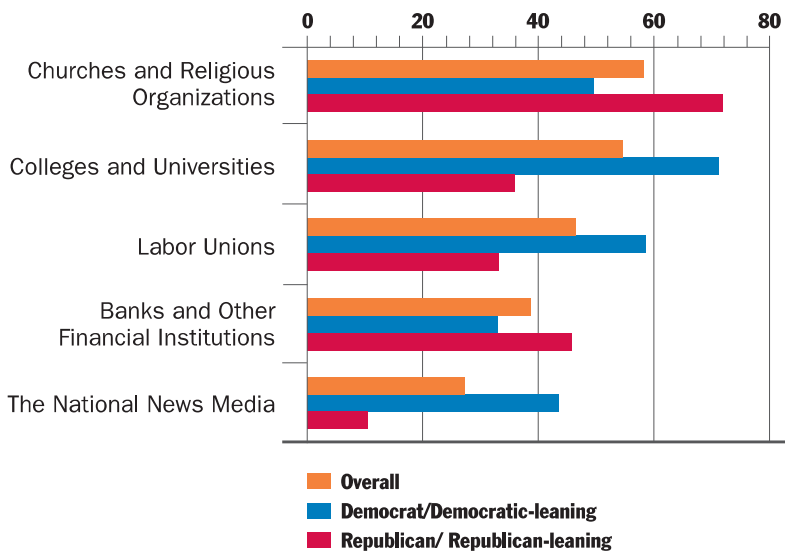
have different feelings toward, for example, community colleges, for-profit colleges, and research universities. The public may be unaware of the missions of varied institutions or how to measure success against such goals. To answer a question about confidence in roads may be easy—one must think only about whether the roads allow easy travel from point A to point B. A question about confidence in higher education involves more. How does one measure whether a university “transform[s] lives for the benefit of society”?

In addition, review of survey responses calls for close attention to how survey questions are phrased. Consider potential answers to these questions:

- “Is higher education in the U.S. fine just how it is?”
- “Do you believe everyone needs to go to college to be successful in life?”
- “Do you believe that colleges have a somewhat negative effect on the way things are going in the U.S.?”

An ardent supporter of higher education might respond “no” to the first two questions based on beliefs that there is room for improvement and that some highly successful people did not attend college. Even a strong believer in the value of college might answer “yes” to the third question.

Figure 1: Percentage of Respondents Who Say Leading Institutions Have a Positive Effect on the Way Things Are Going in the Country



SOURCE: Pew Research Center, Sharp Partisan Divisions in Views of National Institutions (Washington, DC: Pew Research Center, 2017).

Public confidence in higher education reflects the belief that higher education institutions constitute a shared good worthy of public financial support.

Why Public Confidence Matters

Public confidence in higher education reflects respect for the acquisition of knowledge and the pursuit of well-being. As University of California President Janet Napolitano has said, universities:

foster an active, thinking citizenry....They enhance public spirit. They educate—and more importantly, elevate—vast numbers of young people. These institutions are public goods that benefit all of us, and not just the students who attend them.

Nearly all colleges and universities depend on public funds. If the public believes tuition increases are caused by greedy college administrators and that colleges are motivated by profit, legislators are more likely to cut funding. If the public believes that tuition increases are responsive to funding reductions, candidates who support increased funding are more likely to be elected. If the public values the knowledge and skills colleges convey—not just for those who attend, but also for the good of society—the public should support higher education. The level of public confidence influences the resources made available to higher education institutions.

On the federal level, public confidence influences support for student financial aid and research funds. Were Congress to reduce student aid, the impact would fall disproportionately on lower- and middle-income students, potentially exacerbating the perception that college is for the wealthy. In addition, since the 1940s, the federal government has been the largest external source of university research funds. In 2015, \$37.9 billion of a total \$68.8 billion spent on higher education research and development came from federal funds.

In sum, public confidence in higher education reflects the belief that higher education institutions constitute a shared good worthy of public financial support.

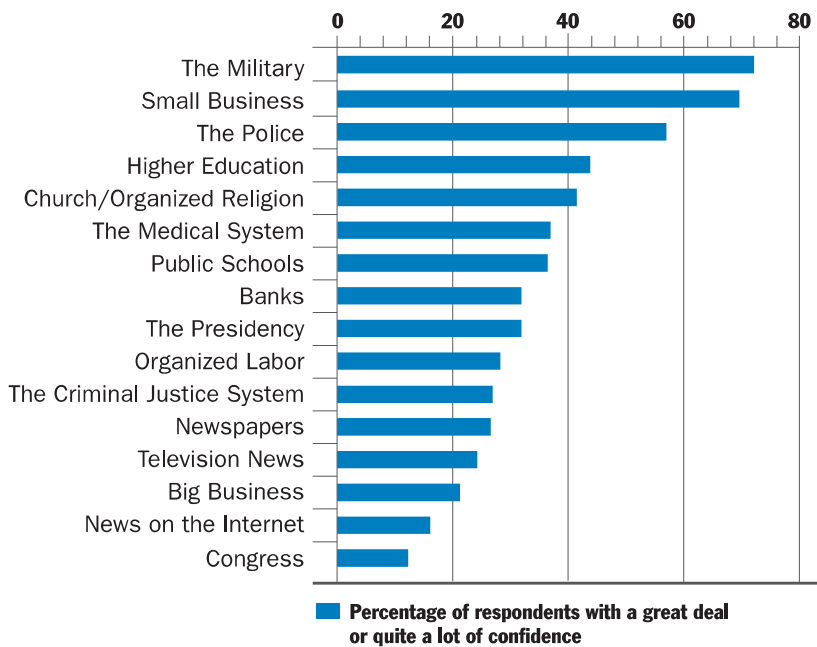
Public Confidence in America's Institutions

Recent surveys from Pew Research Center and Gallup show relatively high confidence in higher education compared with other institutions.

The 2017 Pew survey asked Americans whether a number of major institutions have a positive or negative effect on “the way things are going in the country.” Although the public’s overall level of confidence in most institutions has not changed dramatically in recent years, the responses reveal continuing—and in some cases, increasing—partisan gaps. Overall, colleges and universities rank second out of the five kinds of institutions included in the survey, just four percentage points below churches and religious organizations. However, the partisan gap is wider for colleges and universities than for the other institutions surveyed.

Reports of declining confidence in higher education institutions should be read in context. The Gallup organization conducts annual surveys to measure confidence in various institutions, but it did not include higher education until 2017. While it is therefore not possible to see a trend with respect to views of higher education, the data reveal favorable ratings of higher education compared with most other institutions. In 2017, confidence in higher education was higher than in all but three: the military, small businesses, and the police. For those other most highly trusted institutions,

Figure 2: Confidence in Institutions (2017)



SOURCE: Gallup, Inc., "Confidence in Institutions" (Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc., 2017).

Since the 1600s, when the first colleges were established in what would become the United States, the performance of higher education institutions has been controversial.

Surveys on the perception of higher education in the 21st century appear to reflect the continuation of historical debates over the purpose and proper role of higher education rather than an unprecedented era of distrust.

the public's level of confidence has increased or stayed relatively steady over time. For example, the percentage of respondents who reported having a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the military increased from 57 percent in 1977 to 60 percent in 1997 and to 72 percent in 2017. Similarly, the percentage of respondents who reported confidence in small businesses increased from 62 percent in 1997 to 70 percent in 2017. For some other major institutions, longitudinal data reveal an overall decrease in confidence. For example, the percentage of respondents who reported having a "great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in the church or organized religion fell from 64 percent in 1977 to 56 percent in 1997 and 41 percent in 2017. Confidence in Congress fell from 40 percent in 1977 to 22 percent in 1997 and to just 12 percent in 2017.

Historical Context

Since the 1600s, when the first colleges were established in what would become the United States, the performance of higher education institutions has been controversial. Well into the 19th century, colleges educated a tiny percentage of Americans, most of whom were wealthy white men enrolled to acquire a certain type of culture and manners. At that time, the partisan divide was not so much political as religious: "[E]very denomination felt that it had to have its own in order to teach its children the right version. [F]or a long time, it was good business for everybody to build this infrastructure of higher education." As colleges and universities developed, some advocated a liberal-arts education that emphasized breadth of knowledge, while others supported specialized training directly linked to a profession. That debate continues today.

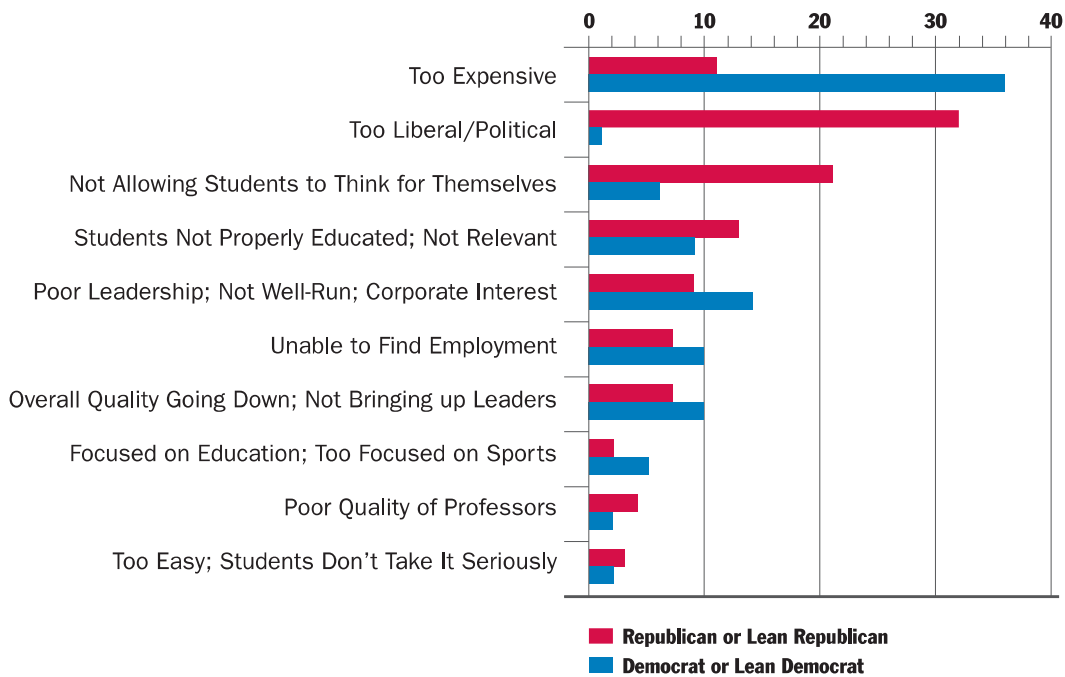
As the United States expanded in population and territory, "[t]he assumption of social superiority associated with collegiate education was resented and contested by democratic elements, especially in the expanding western settlements." While access for certain groups remained limited, by the early 20th century these efforts helped establish colleges "as a clear route to middle-class careers and lifestyles." After World War II, passage of the GI Bill expanded higher education to a larger share of the population, but to some extent the public remained skeptical of higher education as negative stereotypes about the college man endured. "[M]any thought that the relative freedom of the college years actually corrupted the virtues of young men."

Several hundred years after the first colleges were founded, American higher education remains unique and varied: "Informed by the Jeffersonian ideals of limited government and freedom of expression, states, religious communities, and individuals established and maintain a range of higher education institutions and continue to protect these institutions from the levels of government control seen in most other countries." Surveys on the perception of higher education in the 21st century appear to reflect the continuation of historical debates over the purpose and proper role of higher education rather than an unprecedented era of distrust.

Public Confidence in Higher Education: Findings

Surveys about higher education are wide-ranging, including questions on whether college is necessary, a good value, accessible, affordable, and more. In analyzing survey results, it is important to isolate the questions that attempt to measure public confidence or

Figure 3: Reasons Why Respondents Do Not Have Confidence in Colleges and Universities



SOURCE: Gallup, Inc., "Confidence in Institutions" (Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc., 2017).

Survey data suggest that public opinion—positive and negative—is influenced by personal stories.

trust. We also consider questions that measure public views on return on investment, which is best analyzed separately from public confidence.

Measurements of Public Confidence

Many surveys include at least one question designed to measure overall public trust, confidence, or satisfaction with colleges. For example:

- “Agree or disagree: Higher education in America is fine how it is.”
- “Overall, how good of a job are the colleges in your state doing?”

Rarely do surveys include questions that more narrowly focus on issues such as whether the respondent trusts university research or the knowledge that graduates acquire in college. To the extent surveys measure public opinion on college quality, responses suggest high levels of public trust. For instance, in a Gallup and Lumina Foundation poll, 74 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that traditional colleges offer a high-quality education.

For those who lack confidence in higher education, what are the reasons? Do the reasons relate to public confidence and trust, or are respondents dissatisfied with some other aspect of higher education? The issues cited most frequently in the 2017 Gallup survey are:

- Too expensive;
- Too liberal/political;
- Not allowing students to think for themselves/pushing their own agenda; and
- Students not properly educated; teach wrong stuff; not relevant.

Respondents who have major concerns about the cost of education may still have high levels of trust in the ability of colleges to achieve their missions. Concerns about cost are therefore more properly addressed in the context of analysis of the value or return on investment of higher education. The second, third, and fourth concerns cited above align more closely with colleges’ abilities to fulfill their missions. Are students learning to think critically and independently? Is the teaching and learning relevant? Several surveys have shown that these concerns are more prevalent among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents than among Democrats and Democrat-leaning independents.

Public Views on the Return on Investment of Higher Education

Return on investment (ROI) is a measure different from public confidence. As summarized in *Return on Investment in College Education*, one of the informational briefs in the Guardians Initiative, evaluation of college ROI involves consideration of economic as well as noneconomic benefits to the public and the student. Analysis shows, among other things, that college graduates make more money than others and pay more taxes; are more likely to be employed, hold more prestigious jobs, and move up financially; are less likely to need public aid; are likely to be healthier; have lower health-care costs; are more likely to volunteer, vote, be civic leaders, and give larger amounts to charity; and report higher levels of personal and job satisfaction.

Because so many Americans focus on college ROI, especially economic benefit to the student, analysis of

surveys that capture these views merits review. Consider those survey and focus group findings:

- Seventy-eight percent of Americans agree or strongly agree that a good job is essential to having a high quality of life.
- “The reason for going to college is entirely about employment and ‘practical’ or ‘common sense’ life skills....Only one person mentioned what we would think of as a broader or more complete set of reasons for attending college....It’s not an exaggeration to say that for all the participants in these focus groups, higher education is about ‘jobs, jobs, and jobs.’ Nothing else mattered.”

Despite consensus on the importance of job preparation, one survey found that only 13 percent of Americans strongly agree that “college graduates in this country are well-prepared for success in the workforce.” Employers value the skills and knowledge students learn from a liberal-arts education but are concerned that many graduates are unprepared for the demands of today’s economy. A 2014 survey of employers by the Association of American Colleges & Universities found consensus that all students, regardless of major, “should gain broad learning across areas including 1) problem solving with people who have differing views, 2) democratic institutions and values, 3) civic capacity, 4) liberal arts and sciences, and 5) intercultural skills.” Employers felt, however, that recent graduates were not well prepared in the learning outcomes employers deem most important for workplace success. Nonetheless, most Americans believe employers value undergraduate degrees and the knowledge and skills degrees represent.

Survey respondents overwhelmingly acknowledge the economic value of a college degree. Ninety-six percent of Americans agree it is somewhat or very important for adults to have a degree or professional certificate beyond high school, and 94 percent agree it is somewhat or very important to increase the proportion of Americans with a degree/professional certificate beyond high school. Seventy-five percent of Americans somewhat or strongly agree “[i]t is easier to be successful with a college degree than without,” and 79 percent somewhat or strongly agree that “most people who enroll in higher education benefit.” Nevertheless, in a related New America survey question focused on remuneration, 51 percent of Americans somewhat or strongly agree that “lots of good-paying jobs ... do not require college.”

It is no surprise the public is also focused on the cost of higher education and resulting levels of student debt. Ninety-seven percent of Americans say that “financial assistance for college education” is either very or somewhat important in selecting a college, second only to “the quality of college degree programs.” Seventy-nine percent of Americans do not think education beyond high school is affordable for everyone who needs it.

While 43 percent of Americans view state funding cuts as a serious problem, much of the public also believes colleges do not spend money responsibly or they profit from tuition revenue. Seventy-one percent believe college waste and inefficiency is a serious problem or somewhat of a problem. And although most students attend public or other nonprofit colleges, 59 percent of Americans believe colleges are “like most businesses and care mainly about the bottom line.”

Other surveys reveal misconceptions about college pricing: The “overwhelming majority” of focus group participants say that tuition represents more than it costs to provide the education, and 68 percent of respondents believe the following statement is true: “Students pay the majority of the costs [tuition, room and board, etc.] involved in their higher education.”

Thus, responses to survey questions show overall public confidence in the quality of higher education institutions, and public concerns surface largely in response to questions related to ROI—a separate measure from public trust and one that is empirically refutable.

What Board Members Can Do

Although recent surveys indicate that there are many areas in which the public is misinformed about higher education, board members should not assume or suggest that all public concerns result from ignorance, and they should foster dialogue on areas for improvement. One example: 81% of respondents to a 2015 Gallup and Lumina poll agreed that higher education institutions must change to better meet the needs of today’s students, and *The AGB 2017 Trustee Index* shows that 92 percent of board members believe that the business models of higher education institutions should change. Survey data suggest that board members and the public can have productive dialogue about:

- Increasing access. Sixty-one percent of Americans believe education beyond high school is available to everyone who needs it, yet only 21 percent believe all can afford it. Moreover, nearly seven of every 10 respondents agree that many otherwise qualified students have no opportunity to attend college. Board members may wish to emphasize the link

between government funding and access for first-generation and low- and middle-income students, and highlight programs at their institutions that enroll and support these students.

- Efforts colleges are making to ensure that graduates 1) have the skills they need to succeed in today’s economy and 2) receive more help with job opportunities. Nearly three-quarters of employers feel that requiring students to complete a significant applied learning project in college would improve the quality of graduates’ preparation for work. Graduates may be more engaged employees if they have an internship or job that allows them to apply what they were learning in the classroom. Finally, there is broad support (86 percent) for requiring colleges to provide career counseling and networking opportunities for students.

Such survey results suggest the public would welcome more information from trusted sources about efforts to increase access for low-income and first-generation students and to better prepare students for the workforce.

The AGB 2017 Trustee Index suggests there is potential for board members to become more involved in improving public trust. Board members, in consultation and coordination with their institutions, can write editorials, contact state and federal leaders, help form partnerships with local businesses, and educate the public on ways in which institutions contribute to their communities. Board members can also remind the public of the role colleges play and of the sector’s diversity. For example, colleges train those who teach children, design buildings, and treat disease. Moreover, there are nearly 5,000 higher education institutions in our

country—small and large, residential and commuter, public and independent, religious and secular—that provide everything from liberal-arts education to preparation for specific careers. This diverse sector extends far beyond the ivy-covered campuses that receive disproportionate media attention.

Board members can also share data that refute common misconceptions about the cost of higher education revealed in the survey data, such as:

- Most students pay the institutions' published amounts for tuition and room and board;
- The amount students pay (i.e., net price) equals or exceeds the cost of their educations;
- The return on investment does not justify the cost;
- Most students graduate with enormous debt; and
- Colleges seek to maximize profit.

Finally, survey data suggest that public opinion—positive and negative—is influenced by personal experience. For example, of those in the 2017 Gallup survey who reported high levels of confidence, the number one reason was the positive experience of either the respondent or the respondent's family members. And, as observed in one focus group, “most of the participants did not readily accept the idea that the unemployment rate is lower for college graduates, even when given the precise numbers by the moderator. Indeed, participants cited personal anecdotes to express their skepticism.” Thus, while

board members should continue to share statistics, they should also share stories that highlight student successes. Colleges and universities can also encourage reports on institutional programs geared to expanding access for first-generation or low-income students as well as partnerships with local organizations and businesses.

Conclusion

Despite ongoing debate, confidence in the ability of colleges to fulfill their missions remains high when compared with most other American institutions. Nonetheless, recent evidence suggests that public trust is increasingly viewed through a partisan lens. Other survey evidence suggests that public confidence is threatened by continuing concerns about the cost of and access to higher education. Board members can bolster public confidence by sharing positive experiences and dispelling common misconceptions, and they can work with their institutions to address legitimate concerns about access and career readiness. These vital institutions—and the values and ideals they represent—warrant such efforts.

Endnotes

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- 4 “UC tops Washington Monthly campus rankings,” accessed March 20, 2018, <https://www.universityofcalifornia.edu/news/uc-tops-washington-monthly-campus-rankings>.
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- 6 Art Jahnke, “Who Picks Up the Tab for Science?” (Boston, MA: Boston University Research, 2015), <http://www.bu.edu/research/articles/funding-for-scientific-research/>.
- 7 Ronda Britt, *Universities Report Fourth Straight Year of Declining Federal R&D Funding in FY 2015* (Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation, 2016), <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17303/>.
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- 9 Ibid. Thirty-six percent of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents believe that colleges have a “positive effect on the way things are going in the country,” compared to 72 percent of Democrats and Democratic-leaning independents. The Pew survey suggests public confidence among Republicans and Republican-leaning independents has dropped in the last two years (from 54 percent in 2015 to 36 percent in 2017). The fact that similar decreases have not been replicated and that the survey was administered in June 2017—just after numerous highly publicized campus incidents related to free speech and race—suggests that its significance may not be proportionate to the media attention it has received.
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- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.

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- 25 John Immerwahr, *Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003* (New York, NY: Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2004), 15, https://www.publicagenda.org/files/public_attitudes_on_higher_education.pdf.
- 26 As discussed previously, the stated mission of most institutions is related to knowledge or research and not tied directly to workforce preparation.
- 27 Gallup, Inc. and Lumina Foundation, *Americans Value Postsecondary Education* (Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc. and Lumina Foundation, 2016), 16, <http://www.gallup.com/services/190583/americans-value-postsecondary-education-report.aspx>. (Hereinafter, “Gallup and Lumina 2016.”) The same question was asked in 2011 and 2013, with 71 percent and 77 percent agreeing, respectively. See also New America 2017 at 21 (with 60 percent agreeing that for-profit institutions prepare students for success compared to 80 percent who feel the same way about community colleges, 78 percent about public colleges, and 76 percent about private colleges).
- 28 Frank Newport and Brandon Busted, “Why are Republicans Down on Higher Ed?” (Washington, DC: Gallup, Inc., 2017), <http://news.gallup.com/poll/216278/why-republicans-down-higher.aspx>.

- 29 Ibid. Another recent survey, by Civis Analytics, similarly found that Republicans (and those in counties in which more people voted for Trump than Clinton in the 2016 election) were more likely to express concerns about colleges and universities imposing a political viewpoint than were Democrats. Democrats were more likely to cite cost as the reason for their dissatisfaction. Civics Analytics, *Most Americans Support Post-Secondary Education* (Washington, DC: Civis Analytics, 2017), https://www.civisanalytics.com/uploads/2017/11/Civis_Analytics_Higher_Education_Polling_Memo.pdf. A survey by Echelon Insights that focused on “Trump country”—counties that voted for Barack Obama in 2012 and for Donald Trump in 2016 or counties in which Trump’s margin of victory was at least twenty points larger than Mitt Romney’s margin in the 2012 election—found that the top three reasons for dissatisfaction with four-year colleges were that they cost too much (57 percent), they don’t prepare students with real-world skills (43 percent), and they push students to a particular political viewpoint (40 percent). Echelon Insights, August Trump Country Survey (Washington, DC: Echelon Insights, 2017), <http://echeloninsights.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/August-Trump-Country-Toplines.pdf>. (Hereinafter, “Echelon Insights 2017.”)
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- 34 Winston Group Public Opinion Research, Initial Observations from Focus Groups in Charlotte. Focus groups were conducted among both middle and upper middle income adults, ranging from those with high school degrees to graduate degrees.
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- 36 Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Washington, DC: Hart Research Associates, 2015), 3, <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2015employerstudentsurvey.pdf>.
- 37 The six learning outcomes rated most important by employers were: 1) the ability to effectively communicate orally, 2) the ability to work effectively with others in teams, 3) the ability to effectively communicate in writing, 4) ethical judgment and decision making, 5) critical thinking and analytical reasoning skills, and 6) the ability to apply knowledge and skills to real-world settings. Hart Research Associates, *Falling Short? College Learning and Career Success* (Washington, DC: Hart Research Associates, 2015), 8, <https://www.aacu.org/sites/default/files/files/LEAP/2015employerstudentsurvey.pdf>.
- 38 Gallup and Lumina 2015, 15.
- 39 Ibid, 12.
- 40 New America 2017, 7 and 12. The Echelon Insights survey, which asked similar questions of registered voters in “Trump Country” counties, found that 84 percent somewhat or strongly agreed that it is easier to get a good job with an education beyond high school than it is to get a good job without one. See Echelon Insights 2017.

- 41 New America 2017, 6. A longitudinal study by Public Agenda suggests that survey responses in this area may be affected by the economic status of the country. For example, while 57 percent of respondents to Public Agenda's 2016 survey agree that "There are many ways to succeed in today's world without a college degree," just 43 percent agreed with that statement in 2008 and 2009, most likely due to the effects of the 2008 recession. In 2000, in contrast, 67 percent of Americans agreed with that statement. Public Agenda, *Public Opinion on Higher Education* (Brooklyn, NY: Public Agenda, 2017), <https://www.publicagenda.org/pages/public-opinion-higher-education-2016>. (Hereinafter, "Public Agenda 2017.")
- 42 Gallup and Lumina 2015, 12.
- 43 Ibid, 11.
- 44 Public Agenda 2017.
- 45 Ibid.
- 46 Ibid.
- 47 Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, *The Business of Higher Education* (Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges, 2017), 6, <https://www.agb.org/reports/2017/the-business-of-higher-education> ("The amount any student pays in tuition, even one who pays the full sticker price, is less than what the institution spends to educate the student. Other sources of revenue—among them state subsidies, donations and gifts, and income from endowment—make up the difference.”).
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