Research Corner

Studies and analysis from the world of liberal education

The Ways Americans Value Higher Ed

We asked US adults what colleges and universities have to offer individuals, the economy, and the nation. Here are the results.

The results indicated relative consensus among American adults regarding specific statements in the four areas. Somewhat surprisingly, we did not find consistent or large differences between political parties, by race, or by gender. However, perhaps reflecting broader contestations around concepts like "democracy," "citizenship," and "civic engagement," the survey results did show the least amount of agreement around statements expressing ways higher education contributes to a healthy democracy.

Understanding the value proposition for higher education is informed by how people feel about higher education in general. To help frame our findings, we wanted to know how people feel about higher education in the US as a whole. Perhaps reflecting stark binaries to a healthy democracy.

The Larger and Smaller Pictures

But . . . more adults said higher ed provides a lot of value as a whole than said the institution serving their local community has a lot of value.

Make the Case for Higher Ed’s Worth

In advocating for higher ed's value for the country, campus leaders can point to the abundant evidence that shows the consistent economic and civic value of a college degree by:

Highlighting earnings data. When it comes to salary, the numbers are clear that a college degree pays off. Education continues to increase earnings and reduce unemployment.

Median usual weekly earnings rates by educational attainment

Illustrations by Josie Norton
**WHAT THE SURVEY SAID**

The value of college can be thought of in several different ways. Here are the statements that resonated most—and for whom—in each of the four areas highlighted in our survey: the economy, skill development, a healthy democracy, and quality of life.

Half of adults without a college degree said that a higher education was necessary to secure a good job.

**When I think about why a college education, of any type, is valuable for the economy, it is because . . .**

- A college education fosters adaptability to a changing economy.
- A college education gives people the right balance between breadth of learning and specific skill development.
- A college education contributes to individual flourishing and success.
- A college education encourages people to question information and assumptions.
- A college education exposes students to a range of possible career paths.
- A college education provides opportunities for networking needed to get a good job right away.
- A college education provides the specific training needed to get a good job right away.
- A college education helps people develop a sense of purpose.
- A college education fosters the development of meaningful relationships that can last a lifetime.
- A college education helps people explore who they are.
- A college education encourages people to develop their own ideas.
- A college education provides stability for families.
- A college education helps people develop a sense of purpose.
- A college education provides the specific training needed to get a good job right away.
- A college education fosters the development of meaningful relationships that can last a lifetime.
- A college education helps people explore who they are.
- A college education encourages people to develop their own ideas.
- A college education provides stability for families.

More adults agreed college is valuable for exposing students to career paths than agreed it’s valuable for providing specific jobs right away.

**When I think about why college is valuable for people’s skill development, it is because . . .**

- A college education increases individual financial knowledge.
- A college education encourages entrepreneurship that leads to new kinds of businesses.
- A college education exposes individuals to new kinds of businesses.
- A college education provides stability for families.
- A college education helps people develop a sense of purpose.
- A college education fosters adaptability to a changing economy.
- A college education gives people the right balance between breadth of learning and specific skill development.
- A college education encourages people to question information and assumptions.
- A college education exposes students to a range of possible career paths.
- A college education provides opportunities for networking needed to get a good job right away.

The survey also found: 86% of Democrats and 83% of Republicans agreed a college education exposes people to a range of career paths. Only 63% of Gen Zers, compared with 76% of millennials, agreed college provides networking opportunities.

**IN SUM, MOST AMERICAN ADULTS SEE A STRONG OVERALL VALUE IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR BEING ONE OF THE BEST ROUTES TO ACHIEVING THE AMERICAN DREAM, EXPLORING CAREER PATHS, ENGAGING DIVERSE VIEWPOINTS, AND DEVELOPING INDEPENDENT THINKERS.**

The survey also found: Only 52% of Gen Zers and 59% of millennials agreed that a college education gives students an understanding of how governments and democracies function, with 67% of Gen Zers and 69% of millennials agreeing that institutions serve as partners to communities.

More Democrats (72%) and Republicans (68%) than independents (59%) agreed college is one of the best paths to reaching the American dream. Post-grad degree holders (80%) were likelier to agree than those with a bachelor’s (72%) or less education.

The survey also found: 55% of Gen Zers agreed that “a higher education, of any type, is one of the best routes to achieving the American dream,” making them the least likely group to agree compared with other generations (61% of millennials, 67% of Gen Xers, and 73% of baby boomers).

Most adults agreed college exposes people to different ideas.

**When I think how college can be valuable for a healthy democracy, it is because . . .**

- A college education provides opportunities for understanding how individual actions have a global impact.
- A college education exposes people to different viewpoints.
- A college education helps people understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens.
- A college education provides people with an understanding of how governments and democracies work.
- A college education gives students an understanding of how governments and democracies function, with 67% of Gen Zers and 69% of millennials agreeing that institutions serve as partners to communities.

The survey found:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Don’t know/No opinion</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>College education provides opportunities for understanding how individual actions have a global impact.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College education exposes people to different viewpoints.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College education helps people understand their roles and responsibilities as citizens.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College education provides people with an understanding of how governments and democracies work.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College education gives students an understanding of how governments and democracies function, with 67% of Gen Zers and 69% of millennials agreeing that institutions serve as partners to communities.</td>
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**Resources**

- AAC&U’s Presidents’ Trust: [aacu.org/initiatives/presidents-trust](http://aacu.org/initiatives/presidents-trust)