

## HOW COLLEGE VALUE IS PERCEIVED BY THE PUBLIC

Declining public trust in higher education is evident in online mentions about the value of a college degree.

Public conversation about the value of a college degree is at an all-time high and public confidence in higher education is at an all-time low.

Social intelligence research by Campus Sonar recently explored the gap between trust and perceived value by looking at what the public says online about a college degree, focusing on how online mentions explain the purpose of higher education and the perceived value of a college degree.

Online mentions about the value of a college degree are overwhelmingly negative or neutral.

Campus Sonar's industry research leveraged more than 13,000 online mentions about trust in higher education from June through December 2023 in a multi-phase thematic analysis.

The findings reveal that individuals' thoughts and feelings expressed online about the value of a college degree are overwhelmingly negative (38%) or neutral (55%). Only 7% of online mentions reflected positive thoughts and feelings about a college degree.

Online mentions acknowledge positive outcomes of attending college and offer significant caveats.

Online mentions about higher education make direct connections between the value of college and positive outcomes, such as improved quality of life for graduates, wider societal contributions, and increased individual opportunity to pursue passions and purpose—outcomes that match those of a liberal education.

More than 30% of online mentions connect a degree to positive professional opportunities, including diversified career paths, larger professional networks, and increased long-term earning potential. But more than 45% of online mentions include cautionary advice for prospective students. To maximize the value of a college degree, individuals most often mention the need to be motivated to take advantage of opportunities, tailor a major to prepare for advanced degrees, consider a major's return on investment, and prioritize the potential for career experience while in college.

Many individuals posting online say college simply isn't "worth it" because of the cost, especially if a degree is perceived to have limited practical value post-graduation. The widely shared view is that choosing "the wrong major" could have long-term financial consequences.

Rebuilding trust and bridging the college value perception gap is necessary for higher education to reclaim relevance and continue serving learners' evolving needs.

Colleges and universities must better understand public beliefs about higher education and clarify its outcomes to restore perceptions of value for students. Leaders must lead boldly, think differently, and approach their decisions with an audience-first framework.

- **Lead with Transparency:** Apply transparency in your communications and messaging to build credibility.
- **Frame Messaging with Outcomes:** Align operations and messaging in support of the individual, community, and societal outcomes of college most valued by the public. Communicate the outcomes of liberal education using a vocabulary your audience understands and provide specific examples from students to increase resonance.
- **Prioritize Preparation:** Assess, streamline, and re-prioritize efforts to ensure students are aware of, and have access to, support services and preparation resources.
- **Listen to and Serve Your Audiences:** Trust depends on context and isn't experienced equitably. Students from marginalized and underrepresented communities value and trust colleges and universities differently, based on their real experiences with higher education.