

AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

New America recently published the results of its annual survey about Americans' perceptions of higher education. The findings from *Varying Degrees* contain both good and bad news for higher education leaders.

Across political divides, Americans remain united in their support of outcomes foundational to liberal education and in their belief in the value of higher education.

More than 9 in 10 American adults agree that colleges and universities should provide students not only with “relevant knowledge and skills demanded by employers,” which include “the necessary skills and knowledge to succeed in their chosen fields,” but also with broad, cross-cutting knowledge and skills such as oral and written communication, critical thinking, and reasoning, foundational to liberal education.

Moreover, at a time when there has been a decoupling of higher education from the American Dream and skepticism around the value of a college degree, it is heartening that three-quarters of Americans across party affiliations believe that education beyond high school offers a good return on investment and that “the value of the bachelor’s degree is worth it even if someone needs loans” to attend college.

There is strong bipartisan support for creating an educational environment where students of all backgrounds feel supported and for conducting high-quality research that drives innovation and scientific breakthroughs. Amid burgeoning polarization and partisanship, the weaponization of federal funds for scientific research, and federal and state legislative attempts to eliminate DEI, this support is perhaps surprising.

Higher education continues to be viewed more as a private commodity than as a public good.

When it comes to accountability, rather than learning outcomes, the public is focused on graduation rates, employment rates, student loan repayment rates, and earnings as “key indicators of quality.” More than 9 in 10 Americans believe it’s important that colleges and universities provide publicly available data on those key indicators, and a majority of Americans believe that colleges and universities that perform poorly should lose some access to taxpayer dollars. These attitudes reflect adherence to a transactional rather than transformational model of higher education—tuition in exchange for jobs.

Today’s students are also focused on the career benefits of college: 80% of first-year students say that “getting a better job” is a very important reason for attending college. As a result, colleges and universities are increasingly focused on providing work-based learning experiences (like internships, practica, and undergraduate research) to help students connect their education to career opportunities. AAC&U’s Employer Research and Strada Education Foundation’s Principles for Education-to-Career Guidance can help campuses do this well.

“Frustration with the current state of higher education” is fueling calls for change.

Among respondents, 3 in 5 think higher education is not “fine as it is,” and nearly half of all Americans believe higher education is having a negative effect on the “way things are in the country.”

Nearly half of all Americans believe that colleges and universities “push their own views on students,” and a clear majority of Americans believe that colleges and universities are more welcoming of liberal views than conservative views. Only one-third believe liberal and conservative views are equally welcome.

AMERICANS' PERCEPTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION *Continued*

Higher education has become a partisan issue.

Over the past several years, public polling has shown that, increasingly, Democrats value higher education significantly more than Republicans do. *Varying Degrees* provides further evidence revealing how significantly Americans' views of higher education differ depending on their party affiliation:

- 74% of Democrats believe that “higher education is having a positive effect on the way things are in the country,” but only 39% of Republicans agree (a 35-point gap).
- Only 25% of Democrats believe that “colleges push their own views on students,” but 68% of Republicans believe that (a 43-point gap).
- 73% of Democrats believe that “colleges encourage students to be open to diverse ideas,” but only 29% of Republicans believe that (a 44-point gap).

The findings related to affordability also reveal a substantial partisan divide in support for both state and federal funding of higher education. Nearly 90% of Democrats support increased state-level funding, compared to just 60–69% of Republicans—a gap of 20 to 30 percentage points. Likewise, 91% of Democrats believe the federal government should spend more tax dollars to make postsecondary education more affordable, compared to only 58% of Republicans—a 33-point gap. The divide is only slightly smaller when it comes to support for increasing Pell Grants: 91% of Democrats are in favor, versus 67% of Republicans.

Public perceptions of the impact of AI tools on teaching and learning are mixed, with some seeing positive impact on student learning and support, others seeing negative impact, and still others perceiving no impact.

Higher education needs to communicate more effectively about expected learning outcomes related to AI—how they align with current and emerging uses of AI in the workforce, and how students are expected to develop those competencies during college. AAC&U is playing a leadership role here, engaging faculty, staff, and campus leaders through AI-focused programming, events, professional development opportunities, and other resources.

That work is challenging, however, as the findings from a recent survey by AAC&U and Elon University's Imagining the Digital Future Center show. Institutional readiness to prepare students for AI-driven workplaces remains uneven, at best; institutions continue to struggle with academic integrity issues related to students' use of AI; and low levels of faculty engagement with AI are limiting meaningful integration of AI tools into teaching and assessment.