



**POLICY
MATTERS**

Connecting Higher Education, Public Opinion, and Public Policy

How do Americans rate the nation's colleges and universities? What do they expect of campuses, and how do those expectations influence public policy? Public opinion about higher education, though sometimes vague and even confusing, offers some insights for institutional leaders and policymakers as they consider future directions for the enterprise.

Context

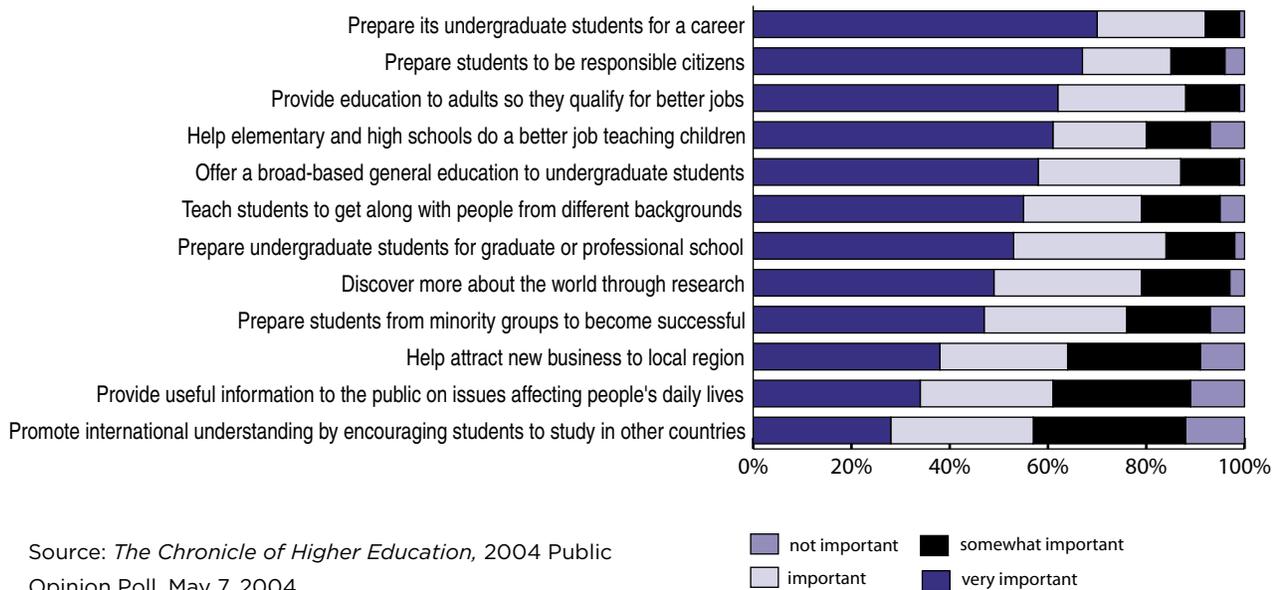
American higher education is currently in the midst of one of the most exciting—and challenging—periods in its history. Demand for a college degree is climbing toward a universal expectation, as postsecondary education faces serious fiscal constraints and significant changes in how it is financed. All of this is happening at a time of unprecedented international competition in a marketplace increasingly focused on intellectual capital. According to newly released data from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the United States has slipped from first to seventh among industrialized nations in postsecondary attainment among 25 to 34 year olds. If there was ever a time for elected officials, educators, and the general public to be focused on education beyond high school, it is now.

To engage in a conversation about the status and direction of the nation's higher education system, it is useful to understand what Americans expect from their colleges and universities and how they think the institutions are succeeding. Data from public opinion polls over the past decade offer some food for thought.

Observations

Americans give high marks to the nation's colleges and universities, particularly relative to K-12 education. *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports that 61 percent of Americans describe the public four-year institutions in their state as of “high” or “very high” quality, 65 percent say the same for private four-year colleges and universities and 49 percent for community colleges. Public confidence in higher education “remains strong

Important Roles for a College to Perform



and steady,” ranking high along with confidence in the U.S. military and churches and religious organizations. Ninety-three percent of Americans agree that colleges and universities “are among the most valuable resources to the U.S.”

This contrasts with the public’s views about K-12 education. The Educational Testing Service found that only 19 percent of Americans feel that higher education needs major changes or a complete overhaul, compared to 45 percent who want major reform for K-12 education.

The findings present a good news/bad news scenario for institutions and their advocates. While a general expression of public confidence is essential for political and financial support, it also can—and does—contribute to a sense that colleges and universities are able to take care of themselves and are thus less of a priority for resources. This is evident in funding trends for public colleges and universities, which have become the balance wheel of state budgets. Campus and system leaders and policymakers need to carefully consider the long-term implications of this dynamic.

More than ever, Americans believe that career preparation is the most important role that colleges and universities perform. At the same time, the public also acknowledges that campuses have roles to play in contributing to the public good. According to the Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 87 percent of Americans feel that high school graduates should go on to college in order to have better job prospects in the long run, up 8 percent from a decade earlier. Additionally, respondents to a survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* rated career preparation—preparing undergraduate students for a career, preparing adults for better jobs, and preparing undergraduates for graduate/professional schools—most important among a number of potential roles for institutions.

The *Chronicle* data also suggest that Americans do not hold a single-purpose view of the role higher education fulfills in society. Though not as highly ranked as career preparation, functions such as preparing students for citizenship, helping K-12 schools strengthen their teaching, conducting

research, and providing useful information on issues of concern were deemed “very important” or “important” by a solid majority of respondents. [see Figure]

In recent years, there has been sustained publicity about the individual economic benefits of going to college, much coming from the higher education community itself. As a consequence, some of the sense of public purpose has been lost, and along with this, the commitment to public funding. Higher education and elected leaders must consider the implications of economic/workforce-centered messages and explore ways to capture and convey the broad, long-term societal contributions institutions make. Studies estimating the social and public benefits of higher education, in addition to economic benefits, are an example of one such tool.

Nearly all Americans support universal access to higher education and believe that price should not prevent qualified students from going to college. They also rank rising tuition as the single most significant problem facing higher education.

Ninety-four percent of Americans think every high school student who wants a four-year college degree should have the opportunity to earn one, but a majority feels that the nation is falling behind in offering people from all backgrounds the opportunity to go to college and in providing financial aid to college students. About a quarter of Americans believe that middle-class families have less opportunity than others because they are unable to qualify for need-based aid yet have insufficient funds to pay for college.

The public’s concerns about access and affordability are translating into increased scrutiny—and cynicism. One survey found that 68 percent agree that institutions could “reduce costs without hurting the quality of the institutions.” In another, 43 percent believe that colleges and universities “raise prices whenever they can to bring in more money,” while only 19 percent feel

administrators “work hard to keep the price of college education down.” When asked about the root causes of rising costs, the public most frequently cites wasteful spending by institutions, and less often the decreasing aid from state and local governments.

The good news is that the public is not criticizing the higher education product—they simply want more of it. The bad news is that they believe it costs too much, and think that price increases are a result of inefficiency and profiteering. This clearly suggests the need for colleges and universities to step up efforts to engage the public (and their representatives) on questions of efficiency and effectiveness, or risk policy measures such as price controls.

Americans believe that the federal government should play a significant role in higher education, particularly to assure access. The public is split as to whether that role should be limited to helping students or expanded to promoting accountability. Surveys have found that:

- The public prefers direct federal assistance to students (73 percent) over aid to institutions (18 percent).
- They support need-based aid (58 percent) over merit-based assistance (28 percent).
- They are split on the grant/loan issue, but the majority believes Congress should increase both grant and loan aid.
- The public is evenly split on whether greater institutional accountability is needed.

Conclusion

Unlike the K-12 sector, higher education has often been able to slip under the radar screen, to operate relatively independently of public scrutiny. But an “out of sight, out of mind” position may not bode well for the future. If higher education leaders wish to maintain public trust and increase support,

especially as concerns about rising college costs intensify, they may need to seek a higher profile and engage sentiments that are taking shape. Despite its changeability and occasional inconsistency, public opinion is an important input in the process of charting a course for colleges and universities in the competitive environment that is unfolding.

Resources

American Council on Education (ACE). ACE's Solutions for Our Future project is exploring the basis of public opinion about higher education in order to improve the public policy climate for colleges and universities. The project is nearing completion on a communication effort aimed at campus, state, and national audiences. For more information, contact Jane Wellman at Jane_Wellman@ace.nche.edu.

Chronicle of Higher Education. National polls of public opinion of higher education were conducted in 2003 and 2004. (Available to subscribers only.) chronicle.com

Educational Testing Service (ETS). For the past several years, ETS has sponsored an annual national poll of public attitudes about education. The 2003 report, *Quality, Affordability & Access: Americans Speak on Higher Education*, focused exclusively on higher education. ets.org/Media/About_ETS/pdf/2003report.pdf

Institute for Higher Education Policy. *The Investment Payoff: A 50-State Analysis of the Public and Private Benefits of Higher Education*, 2005, provides state-by-state data on the private and public economic and social benefits of higher education. ihp.org/Pubs/PDF/InvestmentPayoff2005.pdf

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda. Since the early 1990s, these organizations have collaborated on a series of studies on public attitudes toward higher education, most recently *Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003, 2004*. highereducation.org/catreports/public_opinion.shtml