

BRIEF

Report: Shrinking share of adults thinks college is 'important'

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Dive Brief:

- About half of U.S. adults (51%) think having a college education is "very important," according to a recent poll from Gallup that solicited responses from around 2,000 people.
- However, the data shows the public's view of higher education has diminished in recent years. In 2013, 70% of respondents to a similar survey said college was "very important," though a bigger share of respondents in 2019 said college was "fairly" important (36%) than did in 2013 (23%).
- The decline was pronounced among two groups: adults ages 18 to 29 and self-identified Republicans. Pundits have expressed concern about research that shows waning trust in academia among conservatives.

Dive Insight:

Researchers and college administrators have been ringing alarm bells for several years following studies that show the public's confidence in higher ed has fallen.

One of the most startling examples of this rapidly declining trust came in July 2017, when the Pew Research Center published a poll showing that 58% of Republicans and Republican-leaning independents viewed higher ed as having a negative influence on the country. About 72% of Democrats or Democrat-aligned respondents believed higher ed was a positive force in the U.S.

Gallup followed up on the Pew study a month later, diving into why Republicans were so mistrustful of higher ed. Researchers found conservatives perceived higher ed to be too partisan or entrenched in left-leaning viewpoints. About 32% of those who said they have little confidence in higher ed said they found colleges to be "too liberal/political." And 21% said they believed the institution didn't let students think for themselves or pushed an agenda.

Researchers have fretted over the implications of this lack of trust, given that state funding is a key part of colleges' budgets. State revenue accounted for 21% of public institutions' budgets in the 2017 fiscal year, according to an analysis from the Pew Charitable Trusts.

A recent report from the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities illustrates the dramatic drop in state funding over the last decade. The left-leaning think tank notes the decrease has contributed to higher costs for students, further disadvantaging vulnerable low-income and minority populations.

Other studies show a sizable portion of the public has questioned the value of a college degree and whether students will graduate with the skills to get a job in their fields.

In the most recent Gallup survey, just 41% of Republicans said a college education is "very important." Another 41% said it was "fairly important." Democrats' support for higher ed was much higher, with 62% citing a college education as "very important" and 32% saying it was "fairly" so. Democrats running for their party's 2020 presidential nomination have made free college a key policy platform.

The authors also flagged a steep drop in the share of young adults who believe college is important. About 41% of respondents ages 18 to 29 believe higher ed is "very important," a 33-percentage-point drop from 2013.

With the number of traditional college-aged students shrinking, the authors explain, institutions must rethink their approach to

attracting them.

"Unfortunately, if a college education continues to feel out of reach for many and its value or political neutrality/integrity is questioned, fewer may take advantage of this unique and transformative experience," they wrote.