



## The Public's Support for (and Doubts About) Higher Ed

Survey of likely 2020 voters shows they view colleges favorably but increasingly question whether they're delivering on promises. It also suggests a disconnect between priorities of politicians and the public.

By [Doug Lederman](#)

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Nuance is a good thing, and it tends to help improve our understanding of complex issues and public policy questions. Unfortunately, our political discourse and, increasingly, news media coverage seem less and less inclined to traffic in it.

Take some of the key issues in postsecondary education right now. Most political speeches or media coverage would leave you with the impression that Americans believe college degrees aren't worth the money, that Democrats overwhelmingly support free college as the answer to the college affordability problem, and that Republicans don't care about holding colleges and universities (especially for-profit ones) accountable.

Turns out none of those things are really true -- or at least that the public's true attitudes are much more nuanced than that.

The picture that emerges from [Third Way's comprehensive survey](#) of nearly 1,400 Americans who describe themselves as likely to vote in the 2020 general election is of a public that still believes in the value of colleges and universities and their degrees *and* thinks the institutions must do a better job of educating students affordably and effectively.

The survey also suggests that the public is more centered in its views about higher education than the politicians on the right and left who purport to represent them.

"Voters on both sides of the aisle believe higher education is essential when it comes to helping more students secure the jobs they need to be successful in today's economy. They also believe that institutions can and should do more to provide value to the students they are supposed to serve -- not just enroll them and cash their checks, but get them to graduation and equip them with the skills they need to get a good-paying job and pay off their loans," the report's co-authors, Tamara Hiler and Lanae Erickson, Third Way's deputy director of education and senior vice president for the social policy and politics program, respectively, wrote of its findings. "That's why ... there is widespread bipartisan support for implementing stronger federal guardrails across the entire system to make sure that both students and taxpayers are getting a real return on their huge investment in higher ed."

### **A Middle Ground?**

The survey is the culmination of a two-year project by Third Way, which [describes itself](#) as a think tank that "champions modern center-left ideas." Hiler said that as the group shifted its work from K-12 into higher education, its officials were concerned by an apparent bifurcation in policy makers' ideas about the problems in postsecondary education.

Many Republicans, she said, seemed intent on undoing key accountability measures designed to protect students from predatory or poorly performing institutions. Democrats, by contrast, focused heavily on making college more affordable, with relatively little attention to ensuring that a degree had value. The survey sought to see if there might be areas of agreement at a time when Congress is considering -- though don't hold your breath -- legislation to renew the Higher Education Act.

The survey, which includes 1,389 likely voters drawn heavily from states that are home to key members of the Senate education committee who will craft that legislation, first gauges how the public views various sectors of higher education. Americans have the most positive view of vocational/trade schools and community colleges (83 percent favorable), followed by four-year colleges and universities (69 percent favorable) and for-profit colleges (34 percent favorable). The "higher education system" doesn't fare very well, with 55 percent giving it a favorable rating, and just 17 percent "very favorable."

(The poll's respondents, 43 percent of whom describe themselves as Democrats, 32 percent as Republicans and 25 percent as independent, rate Democrats in Congress more favorably than Republicans over all by a margin of 49 to 35 percent. Forty-three percent of them view the U.S. Education Department favorably, 41 percent give President Trump a positive rating and just 17 percent feel positively about Education Secretary Betsy DeVos. Forty percent view her unfavorably, and the rest say they don't know enough about her to judge.)

In addition to the public's generally positive view about colleges, the survey contains some other good news for the institutions.

Strong majorities agree that bachelor's and associate degrees are "worth the investment and usually" pay off (70 and 69 percent, respectively) and that most higher education institutions "provide a high-quality education to their students" (72 percent). Somewhat fewer (59 percent) agree that "higher education institutions are doing a good job of training students for the careers of today and tomorrow."

And asked how they define the value of higher education, 58 percent agreed that it is designed both to "set students up for success in their careers" and "broaden the perspectives of students and make them better and more informed citizens," while 24 percent cited the former purpose and 11 percent the latter.

Other results are likely to concern college officials, though. Respondents divide evenly on how colleges and universities do in providing students a "return on their investment," with 51 percent saying very good or good and 49 percent saying poor or very poor. They feel somewhat better about the institutions in their state, 58 percent versus 42 percent.

Americans overwhelmingly say that rising student loan debt has made them "worry that higher education is not worth it" (84 percent), that students who enroll at a college or university "should be able to repay their student loans" (83 percent) and that "higher education institutions have a responsibility to ensure that most students who enroll graduate" (77 percent). Nearly three-quarters agree that the cost of higher education is "out of control" (72 percent).

But ensuring that students graduate and are able to repay their debt is a shared responsibility, respondents agree. Seventy-eight percent say "the federal government could do more to help make sure students succeed in higher education," and when asked who has more "power" to improve

graduation rates, respondents rate colleges and students about equally (86 and 85 percent, respectively), followed by the federal and state governments at 57 and 60 percent.

They give employers, students and colleges roughly equal responsibility for ensuring graduates' employment outcomes after college, but say that governments and colleges have significantly more power than students do to improve student loan repayment rates.

### **What Should Be Done?**

The survey next zeroes in on what respondents think the federal government should (and should not) do to better ensure the value of higher education. Respondents are equally (and overwhelmingly) likely to say that Congress should "address the cost" of higher education (86 percent), increase "guardrails to protect students from predatory and poor-performing schools" (83 percent), and ensure institutions give students "a return on investment" (83 percent).

More than two-thirds say the federal government "should provide basic guardrails to ensure that students aren't encouraged to take out loans to attend predatory institutions that will leave them worse off than when they first enrolled," and that the government should "regulate for-profit, nonprofit and public higher education institutions to make sure they are providing a good return on investment to their students." (The Trump administration has gutted rules that hold for-profit and vocational programs accountable for producing graduates with debt they can't repay.)

When asked to rate a series of possible actions the federal government might take toward higher education, respondents rate increasing the Pell Grant for

low-income students (82 percent) far above eliminating tuition for all students at public colleges and universities (57 percent), a policy proposal that prominent Democrats running for president endorse. Ninety percent of Democratic voters in the Third Way survey support expanded Pell, compared to 75 percent backing free college. Eighty-four percent support free community college.

The survey also finds broad support, in both parties, for broad accountability frameworks, though the in-the-weeds nature of some of its questions about specific policy proposals probably make them unreliable gauges.

For instance, the survey asks respondents if they would support "requiring college accreditors to consider student outcomes, such as graduation rates, loan repayment rates and postcollege employment, as part of their review of institutions."

The agencies already do "consider" those outcomes when they do their reviews, in terms of asking those who perform poorly to identify ways to improve; what they don't do currently is to punish institutions specifically because their performance on some of those measures is below a certain threshold. Elsewhere in this list of policy proposals, Third Way asks respondents if they would favor "prohibiting institutions from accessing federal financial aid such as grants and loans if their graduation rate is less than 15 percent," for instance.

Read more by [Doug Lederman](#)

[https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/17/survey-shows-publics-support-and-qualms-about-higher-education?utm\\_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm\\_campaign=54e64bbcf9-WNU\\_COPY\\_01&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_1fcbc04421-54e64bbcf9-199133009&mc\\_cid=54e64bbcf9&mc\\_eid=6f67a838c9](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2019/06/17/survey-shows-publics-support-and-qualms-about-higher-education?utm_source=Inside+Higher+Ed&utm_campaign=54e64bbcf9-WNU_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_1fcbc04421-54e64bbcf9-199133009&mc_cid=54e64bbcf9&mc_eid=6f67a838c9)