

SQUEEZE PLAY: HOW PARENTS AND THE PUBLIC LOOK AT HIGHER EDUCATION TODAY

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INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the United States higher education system has been the envy of the world for its high quality, accessibility to millions of Americans, ability to train generations of skilled workers, and its contribution to creating the vast American middle class. Today, however, higher education is experiencing new pressures. A new generation of students—including many minorities, children of recent immigrants, and middle-aged and older Americans—is seeking access to colleges and universities. This is happening precisely when public funding for higher education seems more strained than ever. At the same time, other countries are ramping up their own higher education systems to compete in the global economy.

Recently, the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education called for reforms such as greater accountability and productivity in higher education. This report from the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education and Public Agenda explores how the American public is thinking about higher education today. Are Americans pleased with the system as it exists, or are they looking for change? How is the system working from the public's point of view and from the point of view of parents whose children may soon be students?

To explore this question, Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that conducts opinion research on public policy issues, designed and fielded a random sample survey of 1,001 Americans, including over-samples of African-American and Hispanic¹ parents with children in high school. The project included five focus groups around the country and interviews with more than two dozen corporate, media, philanthropic, and legislative leaders. The study also examined a series of similar public surveys, going back to 1993, to see how the public's views have changed (or stayed the same) over time. See page 42 for a more detailed description of how the study was conducted, and visit publicagenda.org for full survey results. Funding for this research was provided by Lumina Foundation for Education as part of its Making Opportunity Affordable initiative.

¹ We recognize that there are different preferences concerning the use of "Latino" and "Hispanic." In this report, we use the term "Hispanic" because, according to surveys by the U.S. Census, this is the preference of majorities in this group. It is also the terminology the Census itself uses. We have shortened the Census Bureau's "non-Hispanic white Americans" to "whites."

No call for change now, but warning signs for the future

The overall message from the public is mixed. People stress the importance of higher education and generally think colleges and universities are providing high quality education. Although most parents say that they will find a way to send their own children to college, there is widespread concern about the rising price of education. And it is clear that this growing concern about higher education is most troubling to many minority parents. There is no powerful call for change now, but the study also suggests some warning signs for higher education leadership. People are more critical of colleges and universities than in the past, but so far, the public thinks about higher education primarily from the perspective of the benefits it provides the individual consumer. In contrast to the growing leadership debate—which is strongly captured in the leadership interviews conducted for this project—the public has minimal understanding of the policy choices with which the country is beginning to wrestle.

Ten key findings emerged from the research, which we summarize here and present in more detail in the following pages:

Finding One: Higher education is a fundamental necessity

Americans have stressed the importance of higher education in all of our surveys going back to 1993. Nearly all those interviewed (87 percent) believe that a college education improves job prospects. While people have emphasized the importance of higher education for years, the new research shows a steady increase in the percentage of people who stress that higher education is a career and social necessity. For many people, a college education is not just desirable but, in effect, the only path to a good job. A woman in Denver expressed a view we heard frequently: “To me, it’s unfair to that person who is smart and qualified and can’t go to college, because his door is closed where maybe another child’s isn’t. If you tell him he can’t get a college education, you’ve almost handicapped him.”

Finding Two: High grades for higher education

The public also voices satisfaction with the education that colleges and universities are delivering (although, as we will see later, there is some evidence that public satisfaction with the system as a whole is beginning to erode). Higher education consistently gets higher marks for quality than does education at public secondary schools. Although people are obviously

concerned about costs, 67 percent believe that college is worth the money despite its expense. Today 66 percent say that colleges and universities are teaching students the important things they need to know, up from 53 percent who said this nine years ago.

Finding Three: Rising costs cloud the picture

This picture is darkened considerably by a nearly universal perception that the cost of education is rising dramatically. In fact, 59 percent of Americans say that higher education costs are going up as fast as or even faster than health care costs. There is also widespread concern about loans, with nearly 8 out of 10 people (78 percent) agreeing that students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education.

Finding Four: More and more Americans fear that the opportunity to attend college is being threatened

Rising costs have caused widespread concern regarding the opportunity for a higher education. Today more than 6 out of 10 Americans (62 percent) believe that many qualified and motivated students do not have an opportunity to receive a higher education. Notably, their concerns are at their highest point since the recession of the early '90s, when many Americans feared that college was out of reach. Although the economy today is generally perceived as strong, more people than ever are worried about higher education opportunities. In other words, where college is perceived as more necessary than ever before, it is also perceived as less available.

In the public's mind, the problem falls differently on different sectors of the population. Sixty percent believe that the middle class is hardest hit by rising college bills since wealthy people can afford it and poor people may be eligible for financial aid. This finding is less surprising when we remember that hardly any Americans consider themselves either poor or wealthy (92 percent think of themselves as middle class or working class).² Nor does this mean that people necessarily believe that opportunity is greater for poor people. In focus groups, respondents told us that many poor people cannot take advantage of the financial aid that is available because they lack the information, mentorship, or support necessary to go to college. Many also point out that academically qualified poor people are sometimes hampered by demanding external problems, such as the need to work to support their families, concerns about childcare, and lack of self-confidence.

2 *USA Today*, Gallup Organization, May 5-7, 2006.

Finding Five: But the public's sense of urgency about higher education reform is diminished by "pressure valves" in the system

Considering the importance of a college education, Americans' broad concerns about cost, and the growing sense that higher education may not be available to all, one might assume that the issue would be at the top of the public's policy agenda. This has not been true historically, however. One reason for this finding may be the existence of "pressure valves" in the system that ease the public's sense of anxiety. One major factor that reduces the urgency is that most Americans continue to believe that, despite rising prices, it is still possible for anyone who really wants to go to college to do so. Eighty-six percent believe that those who really want a college education can get one if they are willing to make sacrifices such as going part-time, living with parents, and working. The obstacles may be higher than ever, but there is still a faith that people who really want an education can overcome them if they try hard enough. Indeed, many people believe that having to make more sacrifices to get a higher education may actually benefit the student.

Another pressure releaser is the public's view that a good education in college is more about how much effort students put into their studies than what kind of school they attend. Some experts and leaders may see strong distinctions between the educational opportunities at a two-year versus a four-year institution, but most of the public does not. Seven in 10 Americans (71 percent) believe that students at a two-year community college can learn just as much as they would in their first two years at a four-year college or university.

Finding Six: Parents are worried about paying for college, but most think they will find a way

Parents of high school students are even more likely than the public as a whole to think that college is necessary. More than three-quarters of parents (76 percent) say that they are worried about being able to pay for college. At the moment, however, the vast majority say that their oldest high-school-age child will go to college and that they will find a way to pay for it. In other words, although people are clearly worried, they still think that college is possible for their own children. But as we will see later, parents are increasingly questioning whether they are getting their money's worth.

Finding Seven: All minority parents—even high-income ones—are

disproportionately concerned about lack of opportunity for qualified students

Anxiety about higher education is more widespread among minority parents. Even African-American and Hispanic parents from more financially comfortable households show heightened concerns compared to their white counterparts. Earlier Public Agenda studies show that minority students have similar attitudes—these young adults were more likely than young whites to doubt whether a qualified student could find financial aid and many reported they were not able to attend their first-choice college because of cost.

Finding Eight: When it comes to public attitudes on higher education, “the bloom is off the rose”

Despite the pressure valves and the generally positive attitudes people still have about the quality of education that colleges and universities provide, there are some important warning signs of growing public discontent with the system. Fifty-two percent of Americans agree that “colleges are like a business,” caring mostly about their own bottom line, rather than educational values; 44 percent say that waste and mismanagement are “very important” factors in driving up college costs, with an additional 37 percent saying they are “somewhat important.” Almost half of those surveyed (48 percent) believe that their state’s public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled. A return to the conditions of the early 1990s (tough economic times combined with rapidly escalating college prices) might push the public’s criticisms to much higher levels.

Finding Nine: The public does not believe that colleges need to choose among maintaining quality, expanding access, and holding down costs

An emerging debate in the leadership community concerns the relationship among higher education cost, quality, and access. Many higher education leaders see these factors as balanced against each other, and fear that efforts to increase access (without substantially more resources) will come at the expense of quality. Some higher education critics, by contrast, feel that greater efficiencies can make it possible for colleges and universities to educate more people, with available resources, and without compromising quality. The public, for its part, has little knowledge or understanding of the issues at stake; indeed, only a tiny fraction understand even the basics of higher education financing.

But the public's first instincts appear to side with the critics. The public is committed to quality in higher education, but unlike higher education leaders, they don't see a tradeoff among quality, access, and cost. Over half (56 percent) say colleges could spend a lot less and still maintain excellence.

Finding Ten: Americans prefer reforms that don't sacrifice quality or limit access

The public clearly has not thought much about higher education policy issues, and leaders from government, business, and the nonprofit sector have rarely tried to engage typical Americans on these issues. As a result, people tend to think about the issues only as they affect individual students. In this research, we asked the public to engage with some higher education policy choices. Not surprisingly, since most Americans believe that community colleges provide equal educational quality, they support the idea of making greater use of them to hold down college costs (68 percent). The public is also attracted to the idea of making more efficient use of college facilities by having classes on nights and weekends and utilizing the Internet (supported by 67 percent). The public also likes the idea of having students take more college-level courses in high school (56 percent). But not all changes are acceptable. Less than a third support the idea of reducing the number of courses required for a degree so that people can graduate in fewer than four years (supported by only 30 percent). Roughly the same number (31 percent) back the idea of consolidating programs even though students might have to travel farther to study their chosen field. In other words, the public does not see any reason to make serious tradeoffs and is only receptive to choices that don't seem to have negative impact on quality or access.

Leadership Perspectives

To help us understand the broader context, Public Agenda interviewed 26 leaders, mostly from the government, media, foundations, and corporate sector. While this small group by no means constitutes a representative sample of leadership opinion, a number of interesting themes emerged, which we illustrate in this report with representative quotations. Like the public, the leaders we interviewed stressed the importance of higher education, but typically, they focused on its benefits to society over and above the benefits for the individual consumer. As a group, the leaders were also much more critical of higher education, and a number of them felt that colleges and universities had lost touch with their most fundamental mission of education.

While there was broad support for reform (much more so than what we found among the public), there was no consistent theme on the direction that reform should take. The leaders from state government were more unified in their views, calling for greater accountability and productivity from their state higher education institutions.

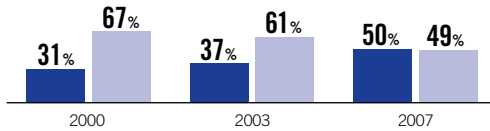
FINDING ONE: HIGHER EDUCATION IS A FUNDAMENTAL NECESSITY

Americans have emphasized the importance of higher education for years, but this new research shows an increasing number of people who believe that higher education is not just desirable but, in fact, the only path to a good job and satisfying lifestyle. Access to college education is increasingly taking on the status of a necessity—the number of people who agree that college is the key to success has risen nearly 20 percentage points since 2000. In addition, overwhelming majorities see access to education as a virtual right with nearly 9 in 10 saying that the costs should not prevent qualified students from receiving a higher education. And in 2003, no less than 87 percent said that high school graduates should go to college after graduation, up eight points since 1993. Taken together, this research suggests that Americans believe that higher education is the key to being accepted as a full-fledged part of the American middle class. A woman interviewed in a Detroit focus group for this project said: “At this point in time, a lot of places, in order to even chicken pluck, you need to have an undergrad degree. I was looking at something last year, a call center for a credit union. Just for the call center alone, they wanted a graduate student.” A man in an Atlanta focus group said: “Once you have that degree, all of a sudden it just puts you into a whole new career field of opportunity or a whole new segment of opportunity to get work. You just totally disassociated yourself [from] the high-school graduate.” A Denver respondent, a food store worker, suggested that his entire standing at work was diminished because he had no college degree: “With no college degree, I was like a bachelor with kids. On Thanksgiving morning when the store opened, the district manager would come in, shake my hand and then leave. One day I said, ‘Where did he go?’ and they said, ‘He’s got to be home to eat with his family.’ He went to college. Although we both started the same year, he gets to go home to his family.”

1A The percentage of Americans who believe someone can succeed without college has fallen steadily, down 18 percent since 2000

Do you think that a college education is necessary for a person to be successful in today's work world, or do you think that there are many ways to succeed in today's work world without a college education?

Percent who say that:
■ College is necessary ■ There are other ways to succeed



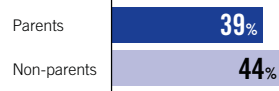
1B Parents of high school students are more likely to say that higher education is a necessity and to doubt whether there are other ways to succeed

Percent who say:

Percent who say that college is necessary

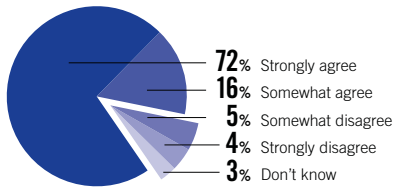


Percent who say that there are other ways to succeed without a college education



1C Nearly 9 in 10 Americans see access to higher education as a virtual right

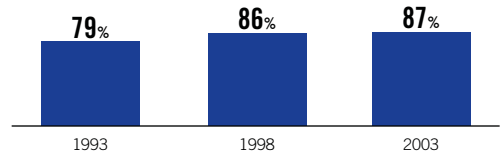
Do you agree or disagree that we should not allow the price of a college education to keep students who are qualified and motivated to go to college from doing so?



1D Americans have emphasized the importance of a higher education for a number of years

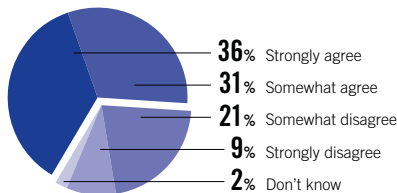
Should high school graduates go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects, or should they take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already?

Percent who say that high school graduates should go on to college:



1E The majority believe employers are less likely to hire people without degrees even though they could do the job

Do you agree or disagree that a lot of employers hire college graduates for jobs that could be done as well or better by people without a college degree?



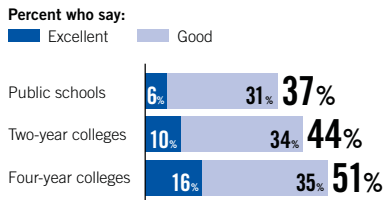
Note: Question wording in charts may be slightly edited for space. Percentages may not equal 100 percent due to rounding or the omission of some answer categories.

FINDING TWO: HIGH GRADES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Of those who feel confident enough to judge their quality, a strong plurality of Americans say they are pleased with the education offered by the nation's colleges and universities, at least when compared to public secondary schools. Although people are worried about the costs, more than two-thirds still see higher education as worth the money. The public realizes that today higher education is not just for traditional-aged students (and indeed, overwhelming majorities support financial aid for older students), but when people talk about higher education, they frequently stress its role in training young people and preparing them to take their place in the adult world. People expect colleges and universities to help students become more mature, more responsible, more able to conduct themselves in an adult fashion. Most also expect that students will gain the skills necessary to get a job. A California man said: "The experience you get in college—you get the time management, the critical thinking, and you have to be able to go ahead and balance your time at school and your life. They're good skills, and they're things that you don't get exposed to or experience in just by getting out of high school and going to work at Jack in the Box." And the public seems to agree that higher education is currently accomplishing those tasks, since two-thirds say that colleges and universities are teaching students the important things they need to know, up from 53 percent who said this nine years ago.

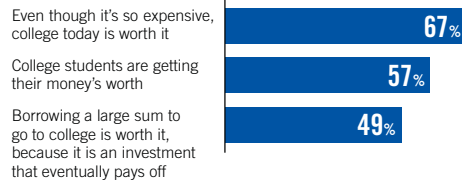
2A Americans give colleges and universities much better marks than secondary schools

Overall, are the public schools, two-year colleges, and four-year colleges in your state doing an excellent, good, fair, or poor job?



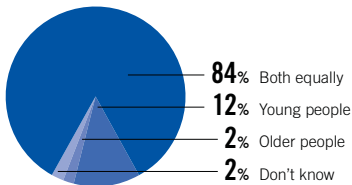
2B Most Americans say college is worth the money despite the high costs

Percent who say:



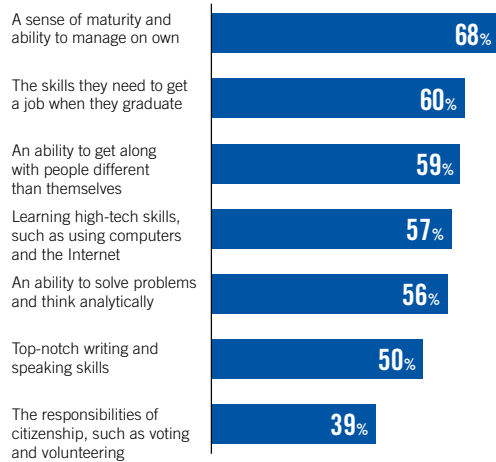
2C Americans understand that both older and younger students benefit from college and say both deserve financial support

Should tax dollars mostly go for financial aid to young people, such as those who have recently finished high school; older people, such as those who finished high school years ago and are now going to school part-time; or should they be available to both equally?



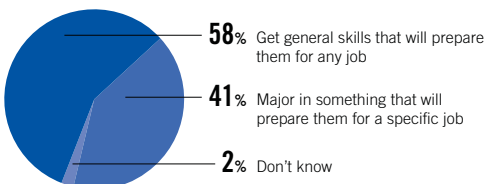
2D But the public gives highest priority to qualities that are "absolutely essential" for young people, such as teaching maturity and responsibility along with skills

How important is each of the following in terms of what students should gain from attending college?



2E Americans value general skills and learning; most see them as more important than specific job skills

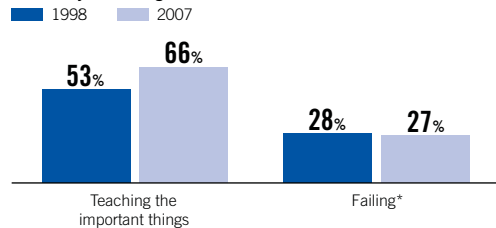
Do you believe that since college is so expensive these days, students should major in something that will prepare them for a specific job when they graduate, or do you believe that it makes sense for students to get general college skills that will prepare them for any job, since jobs are changing so fast these days?



2F And most believe higher education is, in fact, teaching students what they need to know

In general, would you say colleges and universities are teaching students the important things they need to know, or would you say that they are failing to teach students the important things they need to know?

% who say that colleges and universities are:



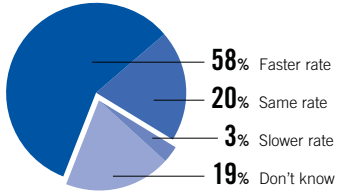
*This difference is not statistically significant.

FINDING THREE: RISING COSTS CLOUD THE PICTURE

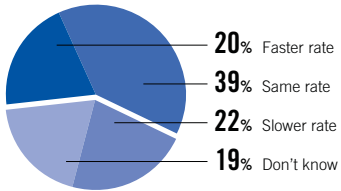
There is widespread public understanding that the price of higher education is increasing rapidly. Majorities say that higher education costs are growing as fast as or faster than health care costs. Loans and student debt are also a major issue, with nearly 8 in 10 Americans concerned about the loans that students often have to take on. As a man in Detroit said, “I know there’s so many young people now that have gone to college and now they’re saddled with these high loans and the next five or 10 years of their life is just impossible. They’re handicapped, you might say, by trying to pay off the loans.”

3Ai In comparison to the following, are college expenses going up at a faster rate, a slower rate, or are they going up at about the same rate?
3Aii

Compared to other things:

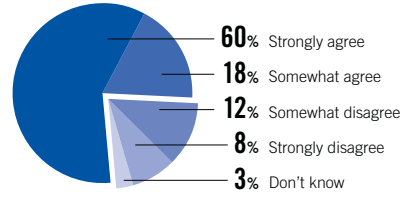


Compared to health care:



3B A large majority of Americans believe students have to borrow too much

Do you agree or disagree that students have to borrow too much money to pay for college?



FINDING FOUR: MORE AND MORE AMERICANS FEAR THAT THE OPPORTUNITY TO ATTEND COLLEGE IS BEING THREATENED

The dramatically rising costs of a college education have raised concerns among the public that the opportunity for a higher education is being threatened. Over the years, the National Center and Public Agenda have tracked public views on opportunity by asking people if they believe that many qualified and motivated students do not have the opportunity to get a college education. Today, the concerns are at their highest point since the recession of the early '90s, when many Americans feared that college was out of reach. Although the economy today is generally perceived as strong, more than 6 in 10 Americans are worried about higher education opportunity. Moreover, while the percentage of people who believe that college is essential is increasing, there has been a corresponding increase in the percentage who believe that college is not really available to many qualified individuals. Taken together, these two beliefs suggest a growing problem: as a college education becomes increasingly critical to success, it also becomes less accessible to those who need it.

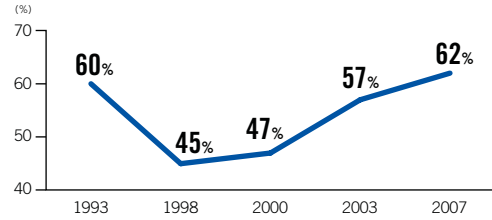
The research suggests that many people feel personally vulnerable to rising costs of higher education. A majority believe that the middle class is hardest hit when it comes to college expenses, which is particularly noteworthy because most people classify themselves as roughly middle class (neither wealthy nor poor). They feel that people like themselves don't have enough money to pay the rising prices but earn too much to get a lot of financial aid.³

However, in focus groups, people often say that poor Americans are even worse off than the middle class despite the availability of financial help and the belief that struggling students can find a way to attend college. Oftentimes, people fear that poorer students lack the information, motivation, and support to get a higher education, even if they would qualify for scholarships. Another potential problem for poorer students is the need to work to support themselves and their families. The point is that just having financial aid is not enough. As one focus group participant in Atlanta said, "I believe that everybody should have an education, but in the real world I don't think it always happens. Some people get left behind." A Detroit woman characterized the experience of many poor people this way: "They weren't brought up to think that they could go to college, and they were taught that they weren't good enough or that the money wasn't there. I mean, just attitude, family attitude and surroundings made it difficult." Another Detroit woman focused on the lack of mentoring for many poor people: "They need a teacher or a mentor or someone to say, 'Look, here's a person who has talent; they should go somewhere. Let's see what we can do to help them.' That's not out there for poor people generally."

³ *USA Today*, May 5-7, 2006. Ninety-two percent claim they are middle or working class.

4A The number of Americans who say many qualified, motivated students don't have an opportunity for higher education is at an all-time high

Percent of public saying that many people who are qualified don't have the opportunity to go to college:

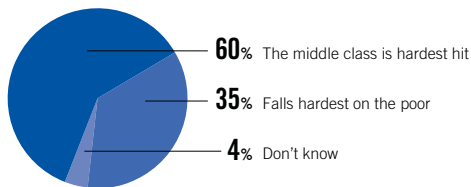


4B As more Americans see college as absolutely essential, more have become concerned that many qualified individuals do not have the opportunity to go

Year	% who say that college is essential	% who say that many students can't go
2007	50	62
2003	37	57
2000	31	47

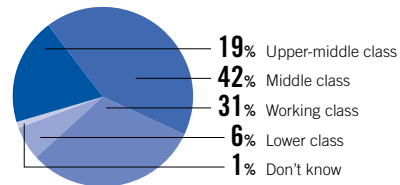
4C People believe that the middle class is hardest hit

Do you believe that it is the middle class who is hardest hit when it comes to paying for college, because wealthy people can afford college and poor people can get scholarships, or the high cost of college falls hardest on the poor?



4D Most Americans consider themselves as middle or working class

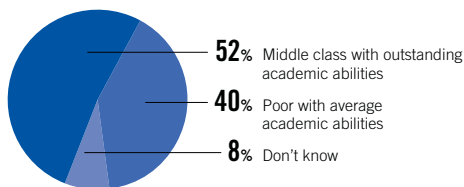
If you were asked to use one of these five names for your social class, which would you say you belong in—upper class, upper-middle class, middle class, working class or lower class?



Source: *USA Today*, Gallup Organization May 5–7, 2006.

Over half of Americans would give financial help to an academically outstanding middle class student vs. a low-income student with average academics

Which of these two students would you feel most deserved financial help—a student who comes from a middle class family and has outstanding academic abilities or a student who comes from a very poor family and has average academic abilities?



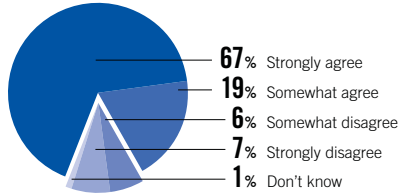
FINDING FIVE: BUT THE PUBLIC'S SENSE OF URGENCY ABOUT HIGHER EDUCATION REFORM IS DIMINISHED BY "PRESSURE VALVES" IN THE SYSTEM

Given the growing belief in the necessity of higher education and the rising concern about cost, one might assume that the issue would be at the top of the public's policy agenda. This has not been true historically, however, as higher education has been a less urgent issue for the public. This is because there are several "pressure valves" that ease the public's sense of anxiety. A strong majority of Americans continue to believe that despite rising prices, and even though some Americans may not have the knowledge, mentoring, or maturity needed to take advantage of the opportunities that are available, it is still possible for anyone willing to make sacrifices to get a college education. Students can go part-time; they can go to a two-year instead of a four-year institution. Indeed, about three-quarters say that such a person might even learn as much. More than 9 in 10 say that these students will appreciate their education more. A woman from California put it this way: "I think the ones who work for it are actually more on the ball than the ones who went to Stanford, and Daddy paid for it and gave them the yacht in the summertime. When I see the kids who don't work for college and have been handed everything, they don't seem to have gotten anything out of their degree."

Another factor that relieves public pressure on policymakers is that the public is less concerned about educational status than conventional wisdom might suggest. More than 7 in 10 agree that even if college prices are going up, a student can save money and learn just as much at a community college as at a four-year institution. A Denver woman explained: "I think there are opportunities out there for kids. If a poor kid wants to go to school, he might have to work during the day and go to school at night. That is why we have good community colleges." A woman in California who talked about some of the "top-tier" California schools said: "It's no different than buying a purse. You can go and buy a Gucci purse. Or you can go out and buy a Wal-Mart purse. They're generally the same exact quality, and they function the same exact way, but you're paying for the name." Another reason for the public's lack of interest in prestige is the near universally held belief that a good education in college is less about what school students go to and more about how much effort they put into their studies. Again, the implication is that a student can learn just as much in a less expensive school, as long as he is willing to exert himself. Much of the public is convinced that financial help is widely available, either in the form of loans or scholarships. Nearly 7 in 10 Americans say that "almost anyone who needs financial help" can get it.

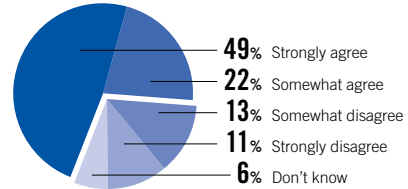
5A Any student who really wants to go to college can find a way to do so, if they are willing to sacrifice

Do you agree or disagree that anyone who really wants to get a college education can do so if they're willing to make sacrifices such as going part-time, working and living at home?



5B Most Americans think students can learn just as much at a two-year school as they would in their first two years at a four-year college

Do you agree or disagree that students at two-year community colleges can learn just as much as they would in their first two years in a four-year college or university?



5C Students who sacrifice to get an education learn more and appreciate their education more

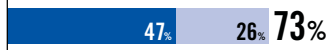
Percent who say they agree with the following:

Strongly agree Somewhat agree

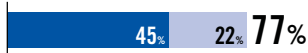
People who make sacrifices will appreciate college because they sacrifice to get it



They will learn more because they are more disciplined



Students don't appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal responsibility for paying for it

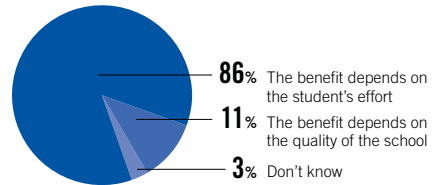


Students who sacrifice will miss out on the best parts of the college experience



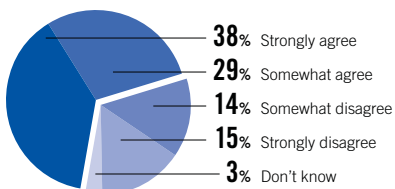
5D Most Americans say student effort matters more than the quality of the school

Do you believe that the benefit a student gets from college mostly depends on the quality of the college he or she is attending, or the benefit a student gets from college mostly depends on how much of an effort he or she puts in?



5E Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid

Do you agree or disagree that almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid?

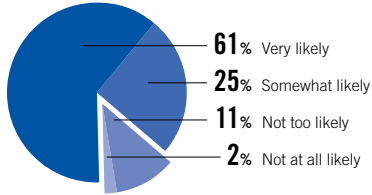


FINDING SIX: PARENTS WHO HAVE HIGH SCHOOL CHILDREN ARE WORRIED ABOUT PAYING FOR COLLEGE, BUT MOST THINK THEY WILL FIND A WAY

The high cost of a college education is of particular concern to the parents of college-bound high school students. More than three-quarters of parents are worried about rising prices and being able to afford a college education for their children. Nonetheless, the vast majority of these parents think it is likely that their oldest high school-age child will be able to go to college and that they will find a way to pay for it. However, there is some indication that rising prices have also somewhat soured parents' attitudes about colleges. Parents are more likely to think college may not be worth the high price. A majority also doubt that the increased prices have resulted in a better educational experience. A mother of young children in Detroit described her vision for her kids: "I hope they will go to college. We have a plan right now going for that. We don't plan to pay their entire college, but we will assist. My parents didn't pay my whole way either. I assisted with that through summer jobs and working while I was in school."

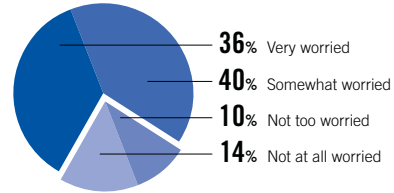
6A Most parents of high school students expect their child to go to college

How likely is it that your oldest child will attend college after graduating high school?

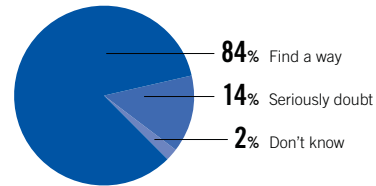


6B Parents with children likely to attend college are worried about the cost, but even these parents think they will be able to make it

How worried are you about being able to pay for college expenses?



Do you think that you will find a way to work the costs out, or do you seriously doubt that college will be affordable for your child?

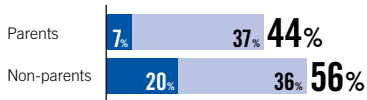


6C Parents of high school children are less likely to think that college students are getting their money's worth

Do you agree or disagree that college students these days are getting their money's worth?

Percent who say that they:

Strongly agree Somewhat agree

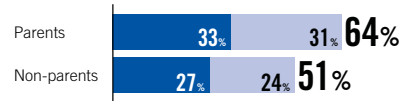


6D Parents of high school students are less likely to think that college price increases have meant that students are learning more

Do you agree or disagree that colleges may cost more now than they did before, but students are also learning more as a result?

Percent who say that they:

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree



FINDING SEVEN: ALL MINORITY PARENTS—EVEN HIGH-INCOME ONES—ARE DISPROPORTIONATELY CONCERNED ABOUT LACK OF COLLEGE OPPORTUNITY FOR QUALIFIED STUDENTS

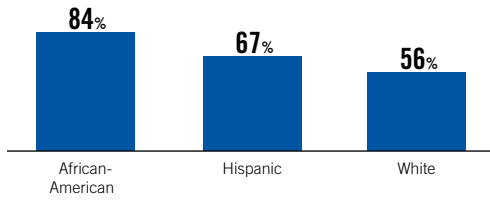
Among all parents with children under the age of 18, African-Americans and Hispanics of all income levels are more likely than white parents to believe that qualified students—especially members of minority groups—will be unable to get a college education. Initially, concerns about college access seem to be highest among African-American parents. However, when controlling for income differences, the gap between perceptions of African-American and Hispanic parents disappears and both groups display similarly heightened concerns. This anxiety persists even among those minority parents who are financially well-off. An African-American woman in a Detroit focus group expressed her concern for disadvantaged students this way: “For those who don’t have the support system, they don’t have the tools they need to obtain those scholarships. We’re in an Internet environment, but not everybody has access to it, even though it’s everywhere. Everyone does not have Internet services at home. If the library closes at 6:00 p.m. and you get off school at 4:00 p.m., you may have [an] after-school activity until 6:00, 7:00. When do you have the opportunity to find those scholarships?”

Public Agenda’s earlier studies of young people aged 18–25 reveal similar attitudes.⁴ Minority young adults were far more likely than young whites to doubt whether any qualified student can find the financial aid needed to go to college. They were also more likely to report that they were not able to attend the first college of their choice because of cost.

⁴ *Life After High School*, Public Agenda 2004.

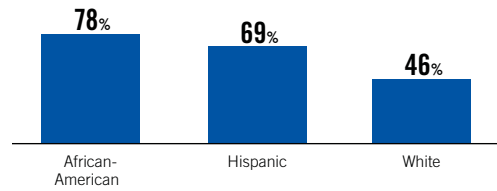
7A African-American and Hispanic parents are more likely to believe that many qualified students do not have the opportunity to go to college

Percent who say that the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college *do not* have the opportunity to do so:



7B Even high-income* minority parents have greater concerns about qualified students having the opportunity to go to college

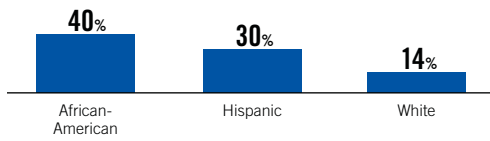
Percent who say that the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college *do not* have the opportunity to do so:



* Parents making above \$50,000 per year.

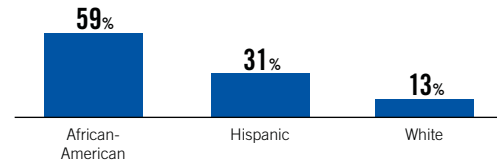
7C African-American and Hispanic parents are more likely to think that ethnic minorities have less opportunity

Percent who say that qualified students from ethnic and racial minorities have less opportunity than others to get a college education:



7D Even high-income* minority parents have heightened concern about the opportunities available to ethnic minorities

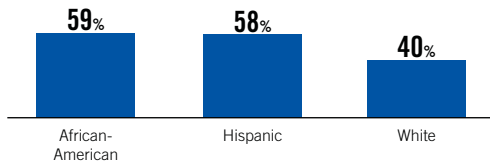
Percent who say that qualified students from ethnic and racial minorities have less opportunity than others to get a college education:



* Parents making above \$50,000 per year.

7E Minorities* are more likely to report that they have not been able to attend the college of their choice

Percent who say that if financial concerns were not an issue, they would have chosen a different school to go to after high school:



* Asked of young minority adults aged 18-25.

Source: *Life After High School*, Public Agenda 2004 .

Note: In Finding 7, parents are defined as those with a child enrolled in grades K-12.

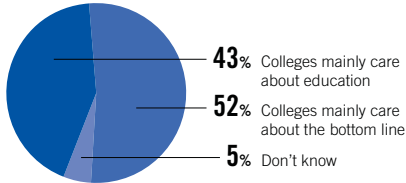
FINDING EIGHT: WHEN IT COMES TO PUBLIC ATTITUDES ON HIGHER EDUCATION, "THE BLOOM IS OFF THE ROSE"

The public generally has a positive attitude toward higher education, but people are more critical today than in the past. One indicator of the budding public criticism is that over half of Americans say colleges are operating more like businesses than like institutions whose primary concern is education. A man in Atlanta said: "When business is mentioned, I think of money. There is a lot of money involved in colleges and universities. It is a growing business; you've got money coming in from everywhere." Other signs of disenchantment include the significant number of Americans who think waste and mismanagement are very important factors in driving up college costs. In focus groups, there was also evidence of a willingness to hold colleges responsible when students drop out rather than blame the problem on poor high school preparation or the students themselves.

When Public Agenda started tracking public attitudes in the tough economic times of the early 1990s, we found majority support for a complete overhaul of public higher education. As the economy improved, however, support for an overhaul dropped off. Today, although the economy is relatively strong, we see renewed support for completely overhauling higher education, although not at the earlier level. In focus groups, people do not typically have a very clear idea of what such an overhaul would look like. In general, their endorsement of this idea seems to be a generalized discontent with the way things are going rather than a precise call for action.

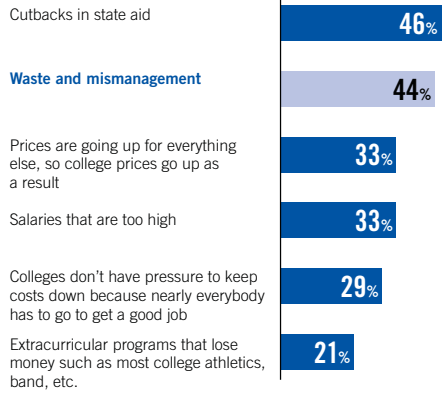
8A **Over half of Americans say that colleges today are like a business, with an eye on mostly on the bottom line**

Do you believe that colleges today mainly care about education and making sure students have a good educational experience, **or** colleges today are like most businesses and mainly care about the bottom line?



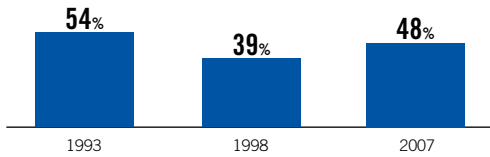
8B **More than 4 in 10 Americans consider waste and mismanagement a major factor in driving up the price of college**

How important a factor is each of the following in driving up the cost of college?



8C **Almost half of Americans say their state's higher education system needs to be completely overhauled**

Percent who say that their state's public college and university system needs to be fundamentally overhauled:

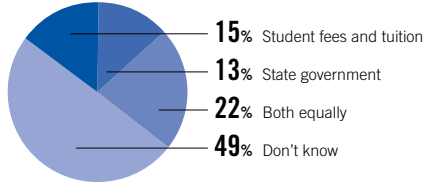


FINDING NINE: THE PUBLIC DOES NOT BELIEVE COLLEGES NEED TO CHOOSE AMONG MAINTAINING QUALITY, EXPANDING ACCESS, AND HOLDING DOWN COSTS

The public has not been closely involved with leadership debates about higher education. In fact, fewer than 15 percent can correctly identify the major source of public higher education funding (which is state government); the plurality (49 percent) admit that they just don't know where the money comes from. The public is also committed to quality in higher education, but once again, does not have a consistent sense of what that entails. Indeed, in some of the findings we have already seen, the public seems to suggest that learning depends mostly on the student. At other times, people suggest that quality can be improved by more government spending. Thus, while people may not have a clear conception of what it takes to offer a high quality education, the public's impression is that colleges and universities can cut costs or take in more students without diminishing quality. As one man in Denver said, "There were several colleges in this area, and they all had a different rate, but they all had a percentage increase in their tuition of 9 percent or 10 percent over whatever they were charging a year ago. What are they getting for that 9 to 10 percent that's going to be different in the next semester as opposed to what they were getting taught the previous semester? Is it really, like you said, is it because the education has gotten better or just [that] they need more money for whatever they need more money for? All of a sudden do we have 9 percent better professors than we had before?" Americans are split on whether college price increases have led to improvements in learning. About 47 percent say students are learning more because of colleges' costing more, compared with 48 percent who don't see a relationship between higher costs and more learning.

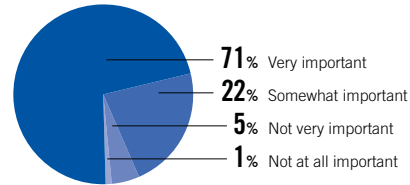
9A **Very few Americans know that state government is a funder of their state college; nearly half admit they don't know where the money comes from**

Where do you think the state colleges in your area get most of their money?



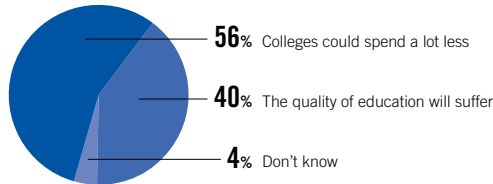
9B **And 7 in 10 say that improving the quality of colleges so students learn more should be a top priority**

If your state had more money to spend on both its two- and four-year colleges and universities, do you believe that improving the quality of colleges so that students learn more should be an important priority?



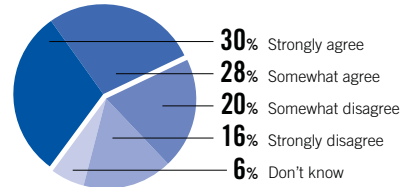
9C **But over half say colleges could spend less money and still maintain quality**

Do you believe that if colleges cut budgets too much to lower tuition, the quality of an education will suffer, or do you believe that colleges could spend a lot less and still maintain a high quality of education?



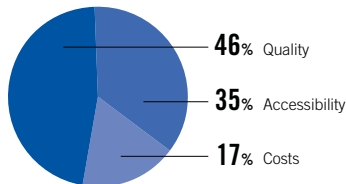
9D **Most Americans say colleges could take in "a lot more students" without affecting quality or increasing prices**

Do you agree or disagree that colleges could take a lot more students without lowering quality or raising prices?



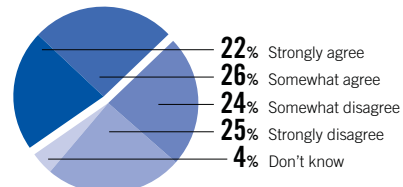
9E **Americans are more likely to say providing a top-notch education is a greater priority than keeping costs down or making sure that every qualified student can attend**

Thinking about two- and four-year colleges—what do you think should be their highest educational priority?



9F **Only half of Americans say students are learning more as a result of the rising prices in colleges**

Do you agree or disagree that colleges may cost more now than they did before, but students are also learning more as a result?

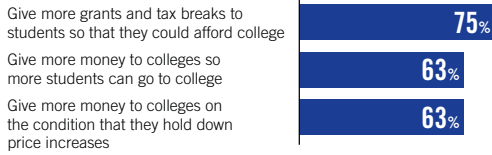


FINDING TEN: AMERICANS PREFER REFORMS THAT DON'T SEEM TO DIMINISH QUALITY OR LIMIT ACCESS

As we have seen, the public mainly thinks about higher education from the perspective of the individual student and consumer. As a result, they evaluate most policy changes by asking themselves whether the move would make it easier or harder for a student to get a college education, and they support those that make college more affordable or accessible. We also asked about ways that higher education could hold down costs and prices. Not surprisingly, a strong majority of Americans supports the idea of holding down college costs by making greater use of community colleges and by making more efficient use of college facilities, having classes on nights and weekends and through the Internet. One California man emphasized the cost savings associated with community colleges: “You don’t have to go to Berkeley the first year. You can start at a community college. There are easy ways of doing it less expensively.” More than half of the public also liked the idea of having students take more college-level courses in high school. Based on what we see in focus groups, most people haven’t thought extensively about how these kinds of changes might play out in reality, but their initial response to them is positive. There are, however, other ideas that do not go over nearly as well. Only about a third of those surveyed, for example, support the idea of reducing the number of courses required for a degree so that people can graduate in fewer than four years or consolidating programs (which might force students to travel farther to study their chosen field).

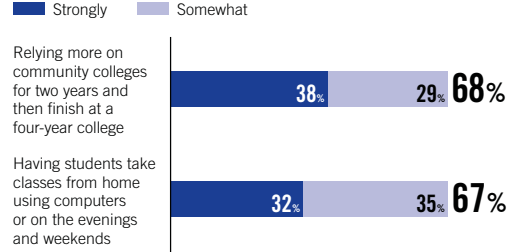
10A Majorities would spend more money on higher education with the broadest support for giving more grants and tax breaks to students themselves

Percent who say that if their state had more money to spend on its colleges and universities, the following should be a "very important" priority:



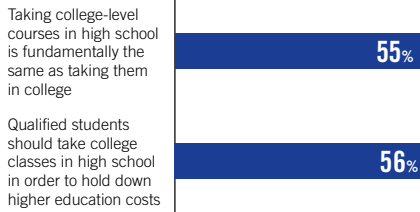
10B To keep costs down, most Americans favor more use of two-year schools and more long-distance learning

Percent who favor the following, even though it may not offer students the full college experience:



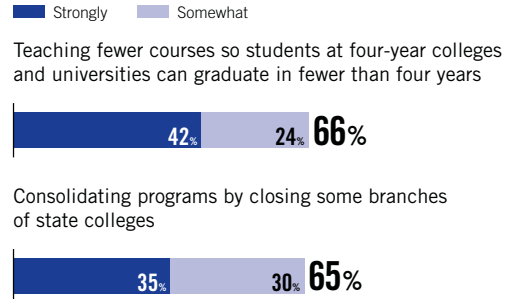
10C Students can learn college material in high school

Percent who agree that:



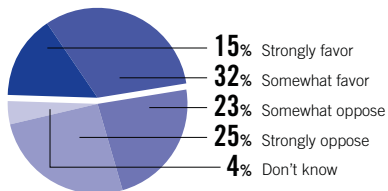
10D Most reject reducing course requirements or closing state college branches as ways to cut costs

Percent who say that they oppose:



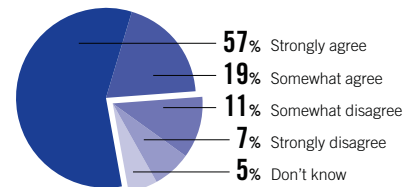
10E But fewer than half support more money for state colleges if it means raising taxes or cutting other programs

Do you favor or oppose providing more money to state colleges even if that means spending less in other areas or raising taxes?



10F Three-quarters believe that online courses are not as appropriate for traditional-age college students, who they believe are better served by classroom courses

Do you agree or disagree that it is better for a younger person to take a college class in a classroom rather than taking a class on the Internet?



VIEWS FROM SELECTED LEADERS IN GOVERNMENT, THE MEDIA, AND THE FOUNDATION AND CORPORATE SECTORS

As part of this project, Public Agenda completed one-on-one and small group interviews with more than two dozen leaders, mostly from local and state government, the media, foundations, and corporations. While this series of interviews in no way constitutes a formal study of leadership opinion, what we heard echoes themes raised in public policy press coverage of higher education by the Spellings Commission and from a number of other high-profile national observers.

Like the public, the leaders we interviewed stressed the importance of higher education, but typically, they focused mainly on its benefits to society and the United States as a whole as opposed to individuals. Compared to the public, the leaders were far more critical of higher education. Several commented that higher education was losing touch with its fundamental mission of education. While there was broad support for reform (much more than we found among the public), there was no consistent theme of what direction reform should take. The leaders we interviewed called for greater accountability and productivity from their state higher education institutions.

The importance of higher education

Though all the leaders interviewed shared the public's emphasis on the importance of higher education, most approached the issue from a different perspective. They typically viewed higher education from the perspective of the needs of society or the economy rather than, as the public does, from the perspective of the individual. Many of the leaders we interviewed mentioned higher education's role in preserving U.S. competitiveness. Some voiced fears that the country is not educating enough skilled workers either for the economic needs of particular sectors or regions or to keep the country as a whole vibrant economically.

"Higher education is a disaster. We will not, as a country, be competitive, our standard of living will not be maintained and our society will not continue to function if we are unable to educate our population. The only reason we maintain our competitiveness is because we are living off of the baby boom generation. The number of adults who have completed college has gone about flat."

"The U.S. is still ... attracting the best and brightest students in science and technology from overseas. But the big problem is that we are not attracting the native-born American talent [to science and technology], and as a result, we are beginning to see the meltdown of American competitiveness."

Access: Bring the disadvantaged into the economic mainstream

Other leaders stressed the importance of higher education for addressing the needs of the economic underclass and economic distress of the inner cities. Here again, most spoke about this in broad systemic terms—how the country would function as a whole—but also saw the necessity of meeting the needs of individuals. Consequently, many were concerned about maintaining and expanding access.

“We need to have access to higher education so that people of different ethnic groups, people of different income levels and especially low-income individuals can get an education. If we don’t subsidize their education, we’re going to subsidize their food stamps and help with childcare, which will cost even more.”

“Universities and colleges need to become more ‘urban focused.’ In other words, institutions in the areas should be reflective of the community by conducting research that addresses urban issues and support[ive of] the local urban organizations by providing research, internships, etc., that help the community.”

“I believe that a much larger percentage of the population can benefit from higher education than many others believe. The K–12 schools, in spite of all of the efforts of good people, are so poor and doing so poorly, but the colleges can make up for that if we can create programs that will help students catch up and succeed.”

Quality: Lamenting the loss of the liberal arts

Many leaders we spoke with recognized that there are enormous strengths in the American higher education system, particularly at the elite institutions. At the same time, we heard a repeated theme that colleges and universities—especially the four-year institutions—did not have a clear focus. This concern had two parts. In the first place, there was a sense that the traditional liberal arts had been lost.

“What we need to do is to provide a liberal education. We have gone [in] the wrong direction in the last 30 years. We’ve lost the idea that everyone needs to know this body of knowledge. We have developed this area of distribution requirements—in consequence, we have “rocks for jocks,” but we don’t have courses in philosophy and [the] history of science. We have kids getting out of school, getting out of colleges, not knowing science.”

“Most of our university centers teach the arts as cosmetics ... something you do when you don’t have something else to take care of. But in business I often say, ‘Get me some poets as managers.’ The poets are our original systems thinkers. They look at the world and see its patterns and see how the patterns interact, interpret them in their significance. The arts are not decoration—they should be regarded as fundamental [and] organic and should be inculcated early.”

“People need to be able to solve problems, work in teams and think creatively. We have to make sure that we have both right-brain and left-brain training going on. We want people to have that tech skill, but [we] need people [who] can think creatively, and we need to better articulate how that helps foster ingenuity.”

Quality: And students aren't getting a practical education either

Our leaders' concern is that higher education is supplying neither a strong liberal arts education nor straightforward, marketable skills. A number of the interviewees gave two-year institutions better marks for having a clearer sense of their own mission.

"We have this situation where the kids are getting a degree after four years, but they have no real knowledge of the job or work—when the most important thing in their lives is finding satisfactory work and building a career. We are missing the boat in disconnecting the university and the world of work in which they will live. In other words, we aren't giving them either the tools for civic engagement or for a job."

"We have to make sure that higher education is working more in concert, or make sure that they validate their coursework, with the industry. For example, there is a push now in bioscience, but you have to define what bioscience is and what the coursework needs to be in terms of employment. There needs to be a clear definition of curriculum in terms of what it is that [employers] want. That then needs to be communicated to students. None of this is being done."

"I'm old-fashioned—a great believer in a liberal arts education. But today the whole thing is about getting a degree. I see kids [who] have majored in marketing and communications. They don't have a clue about what communication is about. What they learned can't be applied to a job. In the old days, the Ivy League schools taught you how to think—not specifically about a job—and higher education was about developing a way of thinking. Kids need one or the other. If they were capable of a deep and rich education, that would be great. If they aren't interested in that, that is fine. I would be thrilled to see someone who has had a two-year practical course. But the schools today have become like the menu at a diner. The gravy is out of the can, the mashed potatoes are dried, because there is an attitude that you need a higher education."

"Our university system, which came from the German system in the 19th century, is departmentalized and based on relatively artificial categories. If you are starting out as a young member of a sociology

department, your value is measured by the research that you publish, rather than how well your students turn out as students.”

“The higher education system has been built largely on one mode of teaching, memorization coupled with reasoning. I am wondering if there aren’t different ways of teaching and learning, not just looking at people who are successful in traditional ways. Interesting educational questions should be addressed concerning how students learn.”

Costs: Everyone recognizes that they're escalating

Like the public, the leaders are focused on the cost issue, but among those we interviewed, there was a divide about the cause. Some leaders believed that increased college costs are a function of expenses skyrocketing in many areas, but others were outraged by what they saw as waste and mismanagement in higher education.

“Higher education costs are out of control. If milk had gone up at the same rate as higher ed, milk would cost \$16 a gallon. Families in the bottom 20 percent have to spend 73 percent of their family income to send one child through college.”

“Why is the cost going up? One reason is simply that for a long time those who worked for higher education were not paid well or treated well. They have been gaining rapidly; that includes everyone from the faculty and administrators (some of the presidents are now making over a million) to the janitorial staff.”

“You can't educate people in a democracy on the cheap—how can you do it as well as possible and not spend your money on it? It is impossible.”

“Now the universities feel that they need the best theatre, the best auditorium, and a library that duplicates [that of] the college down the street. If it is a residential institution, the expectations for the rooms and the food and everything else have gone up. In the old days, college food was like army food—everyone expected it to be lousy.”

“Costs are rising quickly because incentives are misaligned. There are no incentives for a university to reduce their cost. It is a monopolistic situation; they can gouge the customer. Colleges and universities have enormous pricing power and no one has a choice.”

“It is terrifying—my spouse is a professor, so I know internally what is going on. I know how poorly money is spent. They need better management; I have seen the inside, and it is ugly!”

Government funding: Again the respondents are divided

Some leaders we interviewed believed that state reinvestment is the key to meeting educational needs. Others said it was unlikely that states will—in the near future—provide more resources. If higher education has more ambitious goals, many asserted, the resources need to come from greater productivity or other financial sources. Many were skeptical that more resources for higher education would actually generate improvement.

“I’ve been in the political arena for 14 years. The one constant that I hear all the time is there’s too much state spending ... The majority of people do not have someone in college. I’m saying the will to put more dollars there is limited. Certainly, I have not seen any evidence that pouring more money into a problem produces comparable results.”

“Where is the money for higher education going to come from? Here is how the debate has gone. We have enacted tax cuts, and now government has much less money. As a result, we can’t afford to do anything.”

“The top-tier universities have done well; they have made up losses in state support by private philanthropy. The small privates have done well. But below that, the state colleges and universities have suffered from lack of sustained public support. When there is a cutback in funding, the quality does decline. But do you get an improvement with more funding? That isn’t always so clear.”

“Because a college diploma is now the same as ... [what] a high school diploma was 40 years ago. Funding needed to provide that level of education must come from the federal government. Otherwise, the richer states will do better than the poorer states, which isn’t fair. The federal government should make a commitment.”

“I’m not so sure that there’s really public support for more money for the colleges and universities. A lot of people who don’t have degrees say, ‘That’s wonderful. You’re using my tax dollars to help someone get a degree? Now they’re making a lot more money, so how is that helping me?’”

Access: College is too late

Many of our leadership respondents share the public's concern that access is threatened, both for the middle class and for low-income individuals. However, there is a strong sense that opportunity for many is lost long before they reach college age.

"Looking at students who might be eligible for college, high school is too late to look at them. We need to start looking in early grade school to get them into the academic mindset ... Too many of the minority students are really being influenced by peer pressures and what they see on television. They have the wrong role models. They think they can all be professional athletes. It's really a shame."

"We have a lot of people, for instance, a lot of individuals from disadvantaged groups, who are unaware of the financial aid that's available. They just look at the tuition price. They say, 'I can't afford to go.'"

"[Circumstances for] the next generation ... are much more complicated: no G.I. bill, more minorities and more people whose parents didn't go to college. Higher education was designed for an industrial area, where 18 out of 100 [enrolling] was fine, and the rest of the population could get a good job in a factory. Today that is no longer the case."

Receptiveness to reform

Although the leaders we spoke with did not describe the problems facing higher education in precisely the same way, nearly all believed that major changes lie ahead. Many stressed the sluggishness and unresponsiveness of colleges and universities to any serious reform efforts.

“There is a vicious cycle in some sense. State universities compete for students, so lots of construction is going on because they are building something like a new student center to upgrade their image so they [can] recruit high school seniors looking for a nice four years. They recruit ‘name’ professors, and the built-in bureaucracy keeps expanding. It is like those associations that are formed for the benefit of members, but then they have their own reasons to exist. They get a lot of money and want more next year, and in higher education, the faculty members are there to serve students but end up advancing their own careers.”

“I liken higher education to the auto industry. Many of the companies are losing market share by not embracing how much things have changed. They are arrogant, complacent or in denial. It is the same in higher education. The rate of change in higher education is inadequate compared to the rate of change in the world around higher education. We are going to have problems. Can the system change? I’m not sure.”

Ideas from state legislators

The state legislators we interviewed stressed a number of specific reform ideas, especially greater accountability, greater responsiveness to state needs, greater efficiency in getting students to graduate, and more efficient use of resources. (The respondents outside of state government also had a number of interesting ideas for reform, but no dominant themes emerged.)

More accountability

“There’s a feeling in the Legislature that the university is relatively arrogant. They’re not going to listen to anything you’re going to say. They just say, ‘Just send us the money. We’re too smart for you to tell us how to spend it. We’ll spend how we think is right.’ Many times, they go in the direct opposite of our region. The chancellors and the college presidents go in the direct opposite of what the Legislature wants. It almost seems like in spite.”

“It’s an affront to them to be held accountable. A group of people who hold other people accountable all the time find, by definition, that they shouldn’t be held accountable. That’s a huge change. How do we get there? Maybe we get there by saying, ‘You are like an automobile company. When you have a complete car, you get the money. If you only have the chassis, you don’t get the money yet.’”

Need for greater productivity

They noted the importance of getting more students to complete their college work. The public has traditionally blamed college dropout rates on the high schools and the students. The legislators, however, focus much more closely on the colleges themselves.

“Part of our problem is ... We tend to reward colleges and universities on the basis of enrollment, not on the basis of success. We, therefore, don’t generally give [them] the kind of support services [they need].”

“We’re getting them in. We’re not getting them out. It’s the pipeline. It’s back to the graduation rate. We’ve got the capacity. We have the room in the university. We’ve got the space. We’ve got the professors. We’ve got what we need. We’re just not graduating them. We’re losing them once they’re inside.”

“We need to make a cultural shift [and tell colleges]: We’re not going to fund you just to teach a class that you think is important, that you think is cool. That’s your interest, but it has nothing to do with the state’s needs. We’re going to fund things that match up with state needs. We’re going to fund things that get the students out and focused. We’re going to fund you based on the completion.”

Improve efficiency

Legislators point out a need to use existing facilities more fully and to consolidate programs to avoid duplication.

“We have this incredibly expensive physical plant ... Why aren’t we having more extended classes, taking and using that physical plant for longer hours, night school, and weekends? Real professors don’t want to teach them. After all, they didn’t go through all that work to have to teach to the blue collar.”

“If we had people who were willing to teach nights, willing to teach a second or third class, or whatever it was, and received an additional stipend, maybe that would work. Maybe capitalism isn’t completely dead in America.”

“There is a bit of mission creep that affects all levels of higher education. For example, with the two-year institutions, some of them understand that their role is to prepare people for jobs, and [they] do that quite well. Others think that they want to be a four-year college, and want to [attain] that prestige. The four-year schools all want to be research universities. One of the things we could do to make the system more efficient is to keep people in their place and let them understand their mission. There is no reason for a two-year institution to think [it is] a four-year.”

AFTERWORD

Over the past decade and a half, Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education have recorded and reported the public's views of America's colleges and universities (see page 54 for a list of reports in this series). In collecting and analyzing these public perceptions, we have relied upon national and state public opinion surveys, focus groups, and leadership studies conducted by Public Agenda. This report, as with its predecessors, describes continuities and changes in public perceptions over time and identifies current public concerns. This afterword focuses on four of the report's key findings and their interrelationships.

First, this survey finds that the broad American consensus about the great importance of higher education has not changed. The general public continues to consider education and training beyond high school as crucial in enabling individual success. However, as the public perception that college is more important than ever has become more pervasive, so has the concern that college opportunity is declining. Leadership groups are more likely to consider higher education as important in meeting broad societal goals, such as improving the nation's economic competitiveness.

Second, there is also a broad consensus about the importance of college opportunity for those who are prepared and willing to learn. But the public is not optimistic that this goal is being reached, and affordability is a major and growing concern. Compared with previous surveys, a higher percentage of respondents now believe that college is essential but that many qualified individuals lack opportunity to attend. Most parents are very worried or somewhat worried about paying for college, even while they expect to find a way to manage it. African-American and Latino parents, even affluent ones, are particularly concerned about paying for college.

Third, the public perceives higher education as a high-quality enterprise and is resistant to policies that might jeopardize or reduce quality. However, most Americans reject many of academia's conventional ideas about quality and the relationship of cost and quality. For example, the public believes:

- In overwhelming numbers, that the benefits that students receive from college depend more on the efforts of the students than on the quality of the college;
- That students in comparable programs can learn as much at a community college as at a more expensive four-year college; and
- That colleges could spend less money or enroll more students without necessarily reducing quality or increasing prices.

Fourth, although Americans consider higher education to be very important, confidence that colleges, universities, and their leaders share and give priority to public concerns is middling at best. A little over half of respondents believe that colleges are more focused on their bottom line than on the student educational experience, and nearly 4 in 10 believe that waste and mismanagement are driving up cost. Nearly half agree that higher education in their state should be “completely overhauled.”

These findings send an important, albeit subtle message to higher education leaders: Public concerns are growing that many colleges and universities are not addressing America’s most important values for higher education, that is, a commitment to opportunity and quality, particularly if quality is defined as student learning. The reasons for this erosion of confidence are most likely complex, but may spring in part from the cumulative effects of escalating college costs and prices, particularly the challenges that tuition increases have placed on students from middle- and lower-income families. As tuition increases routinely exceed the growth of family income and inflation, colleges are perceived by the public as exploitation of a “seller’s market”. In addition, the public may be becoming more aware of current policies regarding higher education, such as: the costs of mission creep and the expense of the relentless pursuit of status and prestige, as reflected in rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report*; the diversion of student financial aid and tuition discounts from the public purpose of educational opportunity to the narrow institutional purpose of selective student recruitment; and the excessive compensation of some athletic directors, coaches, and university presidents. All of these may be contributing to an erosion of confidence—to a perception that our colleges and universities are drifting away from traditional values of opportunity and educational quality.

For America’s public policy leaders, this report signals a public anxiety that has yet to reach a state of acute public urgency. No elected official is likely to be defeated in the next election for failing to champion the public concerns reflected here. On the other hand, there are clear indications that the public is ready to support leadership that addresses the important issues of higher education access, affordability, cost, productivity, and quality.

Patrick M. Callan

President

National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

METHODOLOGY

Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today is based on telephone interviews with a national random sample (RDD) of 1,001 adults aged 18 years or older, plus oversamples of African-American and Hispanic parents of children in high school to ensure that 200 total were interviewed. Interviews were conducted from February 13 to 25, 2007. The survey was preceded by seven focus groups as well as by consultation with several experts in the field of higher education policy.

The Telephone Survey

The study was conducted by telephone among a nationally representative sample of 1,001 adults, 18 years and older. The margin of error for this study is plus or minus 3.1 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level.

A “live” online pretest of the questionnaire was conducted on February 6, 2007 to ensure that proper wording, question sequencing, and informational objectives were being met. The first 1,001 adults in the national random sample were selected through a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the 48 contiguous states had an equal chance of being contacted, including those with unlisted numbers. For the oversample, the survey utilized a combination of pre-screened omnibus sample and age and race-targeted listed RDD sample. The pre-screened sample was previously identified by the omnibus as either an African-American or Hispanic household with a child aged 13 through 19.

The data was weighted by gender, age, race, region, and education. QBal, an industry-standard weighting program that employs a ranking procedure to simultaneously equate weights by each variable, was used to create the final weights. Counts for the weights were obtained through the 2005 U.S. Census Current Population Survey, March Supplement. The main study was weighted to these counts, and then the demographic frequencies of African-American and Hispanic parents within the main study were used to weight the oversample completes. The two samples were then combined and balanced to the original number of main study completed interviews.

The survey instrument was translated into Spanish, and households identified as Spanish-speaking were re-contacted by bilingual interviewers as needed.

As in all surveys, question-order effects and other non-sampling sources of error can sometimes affect results. Steps were taken to minimize these issues, including pre-testing the survey instrument and randomizing the order in which some questions were asked. The survey instrument was designed by Public Agenda, and Public Agenda is solely responsible for all analysis and interpretation of the data. Survey Sampling, Inc. supplied the sample, and surveys were fielded by International Communications Research.

Full survey results are available at publicagenda.org.

The Focus Groups

Focus groups allow for an in-depth, qualitative exploration of the dynamics underlying the public's attitudes toward complex issues. Insights from participants in these focus groups were important to the survey design, and actual quotes were drawn from the focus groups to give voice to attitudes captured statistically through the surveys. All focus groups were moderated by Public Agenda senior staff members. Nine focus groups were conducted with either African-Americans only, whites only, or the general public (with participants that represent the demographic makeup of the communities in which the focus groups were conducted). They were held in:

- Atlanta, Georgia (2): general public and one with parents of high school students
- Denver, Colorado: general public
- Detroit, Michigan (2): one with only African-Americans and one with only whites
- Chicago, Illinois: general public
- San Jose, California: general public

The Expert Interviews

Public Agenda conducted 30- to 45-minute in-depth interviews with a total of 25 leaders in government, nonprofit, business, and media sectors, asking them to share their perspectives on the current situation and the future of higher education in America. All leaders were guaranteed anonymity to ensure their complete cooperation with the study.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

JOHN IMMERWAHR is a senior research fellow with Public Agenda and associate vice president for academic affairs at Villanova University. He is the author and co-author of numerous Public Agenda reports on higher education, including: *Meeting the Competition: College and University Presidents, Faculty, and State Legislators View the New Competitive Academic Arena* (2002); *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education* (2000); and *Doing Comparatively Well: Why the Public Loves Higher Education and Criticizes K–12* (1999), and *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994).

JEAN JOHNSON is Executive Vice President of Public Agenda and head of its Education Insights division which focuses on education issues. At Public Agenda, she has authored or co-authored opinion studies on education, families, religion, race relations, civility, and foreign policy. She is the principal author of *Life After High School: Young People Talk about their Hopes and Prospects* and *Reality Check* which tracks attitudes among parents, students, teachers, and administrators on key education topics. She is now writing a book with colleague Scott Bittle aimed at helping Americans understand the debate over the federal budget. *Where Does the Money Go? Your Guided Tour to the Federal Budget Crisis* is slated for publication by HarperCollins in February 2008. Ms. Johnson has appeared on CNN, the *Today Show*, *Lou Dobbs Tonight*, and *The O'Reilly Factor* on behalf of Public Agenda. She graduated from Mount Holyoke College and holds master's degrees from Brown University and Simmons College.

ABOUT PUBLIC AGENDA

Founded in 1975 by social scientist and author Daniel Yankelovich and former U.S. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance, Public Agenda works to help the nation's leaders better understand the public's point of view and to help average citizens better understand critical policy issues. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy has won praise for its credibility and fairness from elected officials of both political parties and from experts and decisionmakers across the political spectrum. Our citizen education materials and award-winning Web site, publicagenda.org, offer unbiased information about the challenges the country faces. Recently recognized by *Library Journal* as one of the Web's best resources, Public Agenda Online provides comprehensive information on a wide range of policy issues.

This project was made possible through a grant from a **LUMINA FOUNDATION FOR EDUCATION** initiative called **MAKING OPPORTUNITY AFFORDABLE: REINVESTING IN COLLEGE ACCESS AND SUCCESS**. The initiative, designed to help create the higher education system our nation needs at a cost that students and taxpayers can afford, focuses on productivity: using resources more effectively to accomplish better results. Making Opportunity Affordable aims to help states and institutions transform the delivery of postsecondary education to serve more students without sacrificing quality. Jobs for the Future manages the initiative. Collaborating partners include the Delta Project on Postsecondary Costs, the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education promotes public policies that enhance Americans' opportunities to pursue and achieve high-quality education and training beyond high school. As an independent, nonprofit, nonpartisan organization, the National Center prepares action-oriented analyses of pressing policy issues facing the states and the nation regarding opportunity and achievement in higher education—including two- and four-year, public and private, for-profit and nonprofit institutions. The National Center communicates performance results and key findings to the public, to civic, business, and higher education leaders, and to state and federal leaders who are in positions to improve higher education policy.

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The following National Center publications—as well as a host of other information and links—are available at www.highereducation.org. Single copies of most of these reports are also available from the National Center. Please FAX requests to 408-271-2697 and ask for the report by publication number.

Squeeze Play: How Parents and the Public Look at Higher Education Today, by John Immerwahr and Jean Johnson (May 2007, #07-4). This report by Public Agenda explores how the American public views higher education today. Funding for the research was provided by Lumina Foundation for Education as part of its Making Opportunity Affordable initiative.

Investigating the Alignment of High School and Community College Assessments in California, by Richard S. Brown and David N. Niemi (May 2007, #07-3). This study, in examining the math and English expectations for high school students entering California's community colleges, reveals the degree of alignment between what students master in high school versus what is expected for college-level work.

"Informed Self-Placement" at American River College: A Case Study, by Jonathan E. Felder, Joni E. Finney, and Michael W. Kirst (May 2007, #07-2) This case study of American River College in Sacramento, California, examines replacing the traditional mathematics class placement test with "informed self-placement."

California Community Colleges: Making Them Strong and More Affordable, by William Zumeta and Deborah Frankle (March 2007, #07-1). This report examines the effectiveness of statewide policies in assisting the California Community Colleges in meeting their mandate for affordability, and makes recommendations in light of today's public needs.

Measuring Up Internationally: Developing Skills and Knowledge for the Global Knowledge Economy, by Alan Wagner (September 2006, #06-7). In comparing the performance of the United States in higher education with that of advanced, market-economy countries across the globe, this report finds that the United States' leadership position has eroded.

Measuring Up 2006: The National Report Card on Higher Education (September 2006). *Measuring Up 2006* consists of a national report card for higher education (report #06-5) and 50 state report cards (#06-4). The purpose of *Measuring Up 2006* is to provide the public and policymakers with information to assess and improve postsecondary education in each state. For the first time, this edition offers international comparisons with states and the nation as a whole. Visit www.highereducation.org to download *Measuring Up 2006* or to make your own comparisons of state performance in higher education.

Technical Guide for Measuring Up 2006: Documenting Methodology, Indicators, and Data Sources (2006, #06-6).

Checks and Balances at Work: The Restructuring of Virginia's Public Higher Education System, by Lara K. Couturier (June 2006, #06-3). This case study of Virginia's 2005 Restructured Higher Education Financial and Administrative Operations Act examines the restructured relationship between the commonwealth and its public colleges and universities. The act gives more autonomy to the public colleges but checks it with new accountability targeted directly to the needs of the state.

American Higher Education: How Does It Measure Up for the 21st Century? by James B. Hunt Jr. and Thomas J. Tierney with a foreword by Garrey Carruthers (May 2006, #06-2). These essays by former Governor James B. Hunt Jr. and business leader Thomas J. Tierney lay out in succinct fashion the requirements of both our nation and our states for new and higher levels of performance from America's colleges and universities.

Claiming Common Ground: State Policymaking for Improving College Readiness and Success, by Patrick M. Callan, Joni E. Finney, Michael W. Kirst, Michael D. Usdan, and Andrea Venezia (March 2006, #06-1). To improve college readiness and success, states can develop policies that better connect their K–12 and postsecondary education systems. However, state action in each of the following policy areas is needed to create college-readiness reform: alignment of coursework and assessments; state finance; statewide data systems; and accountability.

Measuring Up on College-Level Learning, by Margaret A. Miller and Peter T. Ewell (October 2005, #05-8). In this report, the National Forum on College-Level Learning proposes a model for evaluating and comparing college-level learning on a state-by-state basis, including assessing educational capital. As well as releasing the results for five participating states, the authors also explore the implications of their findings in terms of performance gaps by race/ethnicity and educating future teachers.

The Governance Divide: A Report on a Four-State Study on Improving College Readiness and Success, by Andrea Venezia, Patrick M. Callan, Joni E. Finney, Michael W. Kirst, and Michael D. Usdan (September 2005, #05-3). This report, supported by case studies in Florida, Georgia, New York, and Oregon, identifies and examines policy options available to states that are interested in creating sustained K–16 reform.

The Governance Divide: The Case Study for Florida, by Andrea Venezia and Joni E. Finney (2006, #05-4).

The Governance Divide: The Case Study for Georgia, by Andrea Venezia, Patrick M. Callan, Michael W. Kirst, and Michael D. Usdan (2006, #05-5).

The Governance Divide: The Case Study for New York, by Andrea Venezia, Michael W. Kirst, and Michael D. Usdan (2006, #05-6).

The Governance Divide: The Case Study for Oregon, by Andrea Venezia and Michael W. Kirst (2006, #05-7).

Borrowers Who Drop Out: A Neglected Aspect of the College Student Loan Trend, by Lawrence Gladieux and Laura Perna (May 2005, #05-2). This report examines the experiences of students who borrow to finance their educations, but do not complete their postsecondary programs. Using the latest comprehensive data, this report compares borrowers who drop out with other groups of students, and provides recommendations on policies and programs that would better prepare, support, and

guide students—especially low-income students—in completing their degrees.

Case Study of Utah Higher Education, by Kathy Reeves Bracco and Mario Martinez (April 2005, #05-1). This report examines state policies and performance in the areas of enrollment and affordability. Compared with other states, Utah has been able to maintain a system of higher education that is more affordable for students, while enrollments have almost doubled over the past 20 years.

Measuring Up 2004: The National Report Card on Higher Education (September 2004). *Measuring Up 2004* consists of a national report card for higher education (report #04-5) and 50 state report cards (#04-4). The purpose of *Measuring Up 2004* is to provide the public and policymakers with information to assess and improve postsecondary education in each state. For the first time, this edition provides information about each state's improvement over the past decade. Visit www.highereducation.org to download *Measuring Up 2004* or to make your own comparisons of state performance in higher education.

Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators, and Data Sources for Measuring Up 2004 (November 2004, #04-6).

Ensuring Access with Quality to California's Community Colleges, by Gerald C. Hayward, Dennis P. Jones, Aims C. McGuinness, Jr., and Allene Timar, with a postscript by Nancy Shulock (May 2004, #04-3). This report finds that enrollment growth pressures, fee increases, and recent budget cuts in the California Community Colleges are having significant detrimental effects on student access and program quality. The report also provides recommendations for creating improvements that build from the state policy context and from existing promising practices within the community colleges.

Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003, by John Immerwahr (February 2004, #04-2). This public opinion survey, prepared by Public Agenda for the National Center, reveals that public attitudes about the importance of higher education have remained stable during the recent economic downturn. The survey also finds that there are some growing public concerns about the costs of higher education, especially for those groups most affected, including parents of high school students, African-Americans, and Hispanics.

Responding to the Crisis in College Opportunity (January 2004, #04-1). This policy statement, developed by education policy experts at Lansdowne, Virginia, proposes short-term emergency measures and long-term priorities for governors and legislators to consider for funding higher education during the current lean budget years. *Responding to the Crisis* suggests that in 2004 the highest priority for state higher education budgets should be to protect college access and affordability for students and families.

With Diploma in Hand: Hispanic High School Seniors Talk About Their Future, by John Immerwahr (June 2003, #03-2). This report by Public Agenda explores

some of the primary obstacles that many Hispanic students face in seeking higher education—barriers that suggest opportunities for creative public policy to improve college attendance and completion rates among Hispanics.

Purposes, Policies, Performance: Higher Education and the Fulfillment of a State's Public Agenda (February 2003, #03-1). This essay is drawn from discussions of higher education leaders and policy officials at a roundtable convened in June 2002 at New Jersey City University on the relationship between public purposes, policies, and performance of American higher education.

Measuring Up 2002: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education (October 2002, #02-7). This report card, which updates the inaugural edition released in 2000, grades each state on its performance in five key areas of higher education. *Measuring Up 2002* also evaluates each state's progress in relation to its own results from 2000.

Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators, and Data Sources for Measuring Up 2002 (October 2002, #02-8).

State Policy and Community College–Baccalaureate Transfer, by Jane V. Wellman (July 2002, #02-6). This report recommends state policies to energize and improve higher education performance regarding transfers from community colleges to four-year institutions.

Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education: The Early Years (June 2002, #02-5). The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE) attained remarkable success in funding innovative and enduring projects during its early years. This report, prepared by FIPSE's early program officers, describes how those results were achieved.

Losing Ground: A National Status Report on the Affordability of American Higher Education (May 2002, #02-3). This national status report documents the declining affordability of higher education for American families and highlights public policies that support affordable higher education. It provides state-by-state summaries as well as national findings.

The Affordability of Higher Education: A Review of Recent Survey Research, by John Immerwahr (May 2002, #02-4). This review of recent surveys by Public Agenda confirms that Americans feel that rising college costs threaten to make higher education inaccessible for many people.

Coping with Recession: Public Policy, Economic Downturns, and Higher Education, by Patrick M. Callan (February 2002, #02-2). This report outlines the major policy considerations that states and institutions of higher education face during economic downturns.

Competition and Collaboration in California Higher Education, by Kathy Reeves Bracco and Patrick M. Callan (January 2002, #02-1). This report argues that the

structure of California's state higher education system limits the system's capacity for collaboration.

Measuring Up 2000: The State-by-State Report Card for Higher Education

(November 2000, #00-3). This first-of-its-kind report card grades each state on its performance in higher education. The report card also provides comprehensive profiles of each state and brief states-at-a-glance comparisons.

Beneath the Surface: A Statistical Analysis of the Major Variables Associated with State Grades in Measuring Up 2000, by Alisa F. Cunningham and Jane V. Wellman (November 2001, #01-4). Using statistical analysis, this report explores the "drivers" that predict overall performance in *Measuring Up 2000*.

Supplementary Analysis for Measuring Up 2000: An Exploratory Report, by Mario Martinez (November 2001, #01-3). This supplement explores the relationships within and among the performance categories in *Measuring Up 2000*.

Some Next Steps for States: A Follow-up to Measuring Up 2000, by Dennis Jones and Karen Paulson (June 2001, #01-2). This report suggests a range of actions that states can take to bridge the gap between state performance identified in *Measuring Up 2000* and the formulation of effective policy to improve performance in higher education.

A Review of Tests Performed on the Data in Measuring Up 2000, by Peter Ewell (June 2001, #01-1). This review describes the statistical testing performed on the data in *Measuring Up 2000* by the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems.

Recent State Policy Initiatives in Education: A Supplement to Measuring Up 2000, by Aims C. McGuinness, Jr. (December 2000, #00-6). This supplement highlights education initiatives that states have adopted since 1997–98.

Assessing Student Learning Outcomes: A Supplement to Measuring Up 2000, by Peter Ewell and Paula Ries (December 2000, #00-5). This report is a national survey of state efforts to assess student learning outcomes in higher education.

Technical Guide Documenting Methodology, Indicators and Data Sources for Measuring Up 2000 (November 2000, #00-4).

A State-by-State Report Card on Higher Education: Prospectus (March 2000, #00-1). This document summarizes the goals of the National Center's report card project.

Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African-American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education, by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (May 2000, #00-2). This report by Public Agenda finds that Americans overwhelmingly see higher education as essential for success. Survey results are also available for the following states:

Great Expectations: How Pennsylvanians View Higher Education (May 2000, #00-2b).

Great Expectations: How Floridians View Higher Education (August 2000, #00-2c).

Great Expectations: How Coloradans View Higher Education (August 2000, #00-2d).

Great Expectations: How Californians View Higher Education (August 2000, #00-2e).

Great Expectations: How New Yorkers View Higher Education (October 2000, #00-2f).

Great Expectations: How Illinois Residents View Higher Education (October 2000, #00-2h).

State Spending for Higher Education in the Next Decade: The Battle to Sustain Current Support, by Harold A. Hovey (July 1999, #99-3). This fiscal forecast of state and local spending patterns finds that the vast majority of states will face significant fiscal deficits over the next eight years, which will in turn lead to increased scrutiny of higher education in almost all states, and to curtailed spending for public higher education in many states.

South Dakota: Developing Policy-Driven Change in Higher Education, by Mario Martinez (June 1999, #99-2). This report describes the processes for change in higher education that government, business, and higher education leaders are creating and implementing in South Dakota.

Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (January 1999, #99-1). This paper reports the views of those most involved with decision-making about higher education, based on focus groups and a survey conducted by Public Agenda.

The Challenges and Opportunities Facing Higher Education: An Agenda for Policy Research, by Dennis Jones, Peter Ewell, and Aims McGuinness, Jr. (December 1998, #98-8). This report argues that due to substantial changes in the landscape of postsecondary education, new state-level policy frameworks must be developed and implemented.

Higher Education Governance: Balancing Institutional and Market Influences, by Richard C. Richardson, Jr., Kathy Reeves Bracco, Patrick M. Callan, and Joni E. Finney (November 1998, #98-7). This publication describes the structural relationships that affect institutional effectiveness in higher education, and argues that state policy should strive for a balance between institutional and market forces.

Federal Tuition Tax Credits and State Higher Education Policy: A Guide for State Policy Makers, by Kristin D. Conklin (December 1998, #98-6). This report examines the implications of the federal income tax provisions for students and their families, and makes recommendations for state higher education policy.

The Challenges Facing California Higher Education: A Memorandum to the Next Governor of California, by David W. Breneman (September 1998, #98-5). This memorandum argues that California should develop a new Master Plan for Higher Education.

Tidal Wave II Revisited: A Review of Earlier Enrollment Projections for California

Higher Education, by Gerald C. Hayward, David W. Breneman, and Leobardo F. Estrada (September 1998, #98-4). This review finds that earlier forecasts of a surge in higher education enrollments were accurate.

Organizing for Learning: The View from the Governor's Office, by James B. Hunt Jr., chair of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and former governor of North Carolina (June 1998, #98-3). This publication is an address to the American Association for Higher Education concerning opportunity in higher education.

The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (Spring 1998, #98-2). This report is a national survey of Americans' views on higher education, conducted and reported by Public Agenda.

Concept Paper: A National Center to Address Higher Education Policy, by Patrick M. Callan (March 1998, #98-1). This concept paper describes the purposes of the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.

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OTHER REPORTS BY THE NATIONAL CENTER AND PUBLIC AGENDA:

The Closing Gateway, by John Immerwahr with Steve Farkas (California Higher Education Policy Center, September 1993).

Enduring Values, Changing Concerns: What Californians Expect from Their Higher Education System, by John Immerwahr (California Higher Education Policy Center, March 1997).

The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, Spring 1998).

Taking Responsibility: Leaders' Expectations of Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, January 1999).

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Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education, by John Immerwahr with Tony Foleno (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, May 2000).

Great Expectations: How Californians View Higher Education, by John Immerwahr (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, August 2000).

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With Diploma in Hand: Hispanic High School Seniors Talk About Their Future, by John Immerwahr (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, June 2003).

Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003, by John Immerwahr (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, February 2004, www.highereducation.org/reports/pubatt/).