

Public Attitudes on Higher Education

A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003

By John Immerwahr
Senior Research Fellow
Public Agenda

February 2004



Prepared by Public Agenda
for

The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education

Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. Stability in Values.....	2
2. Growing Concerns about Access.....	3
3. Attitudes about Social Class and Access.....	6
4. Older People Seeking Retraining.....	8
5. The Responsibility of Students.....	8
6. Necessary for Success.....	9
7. Holding the Line on Price Increases.....	11
Conclusion: Growing Importance of Higher Education, Concerns about Access.....	12
Appendix.....	14
About the Author.....	20
About Public Agenda.....	20
About the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education.....	21

National Center Report #04-2

© 2004 by The National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, and Public Agenda.
Material may be duplicated only with full attribution.

Introduction

Public Agenda and the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education have completed a series of studies on public attitudes toward higher education, beginning with two relatively small-scale surveys in 1993 and 1998. In 2000, we published a much more extensive study entitled *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education*. *Great Expectations* painted a rather rosy picture of public attitudes toward higher education. Many Americans thought that higher education was extremely important and was generally doing a good job. Although people were clearly worried about its high cost, most Americans felt that the task of providing a higher education to the next generation was “difficult but doable.” Seventy-five percent of parents of high school students, for example, said that it was certain or very likely that their oldest child would attend college, and the vast majority (93%) of those who expected their child to go to college said that they would “find a way to work out the costs.”

In *Great Expectations*, we concluded that “for most Americans, higher education is a public policy success story.” We also said that this positive outlook was rather fragile, and we speculated that an economic downturn could “upset the apple cart,” especially if access to higher education seemed threatened. We were particularly concerned about the situation for African Americans and Hispanics. *Great Expectations* had found that African American and Hispanic high school parents—seemingly more so than white parents—attached a great deal of importance to higher education as a way for their children to become successful, and we were worried that “if an economic downturn makes access to higher education more difficult for minority groups, then the dashed hopes that follow could be especially disheartening.”

The country has, in fact, experienced tough economic times in the years since we wrote those words. Many state governments are in a state of economic crisis, and public higher education is competing with other services (such as K–12, highways, and prisons) for scarce public resources. The tough times have taken their toll on higher education in terms of cutbacks and sharp increases in tuition and fees.

To examine some of the impacts of these changes on public attitudes, we have recently completed another small-scale survey. The survey included 16 substantive

questions, all of which had been used in our previous studies; it was conducted in October 2003 and included 801 adult respondents. We also called several of our respondents back for more in-depth discussions of the views they had expressed in the surveys.

Public opinion on higher education has remained relatively stable. This is not surprising, since there is often a lag between objective changes and public opinion, particularly when it comes to subjects that are not at the top of the public's agenda. But there are some signs that public attitudes toward higher education have become more troubled, especially for those groups most affected, including parents of high school students, African Americans, and Hispanics. In this memo we will review both the areas of stability and also some of the statistically significant changes over time.

1. Stability in Values

At the broadest level, attitudes on higher education have changed little since our last study in 2000.

In the years since our last study, the public has had to wrestle with many issues—terrorism, war in Afghanistan and Iraq, recession, and unemployment, among others. Higher education—never a front-burner issue—has not been a major focus of public attention. Not surprisingly, we found little change in the public's values regarding higher education. Indeed, attitudes on the broad value issues have been remarkably stable for the past 10 years. The vast majority of Americans continue to believe that getting a college education is more important than it was in the past, that the country can never have too many college graduates, and that we should not allow the price of a higher education to exclude qualified and motivated students from getting a college education. Table 1 presents several questions whose responses show very little change from 1993 to 2003.*

* See appendix for full wording and responses for all questions in this report.

Table One

	General Public			
	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %	1998 (n=700) %	1993 (n=502) %
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 (strongly or somewhat agree).	91	93	89	89
High school graduates should go on to college [rather than taking any decent job after high school] because in the long run they'll have better job prospects.	87	NA	86	79
The number of people in the U.S. who have a college degree is one area where there can never be too much of a good thing.	78	76	NA	NA
Getting a college education today is more important than it was 10 years ago.	76	77	75	NA
Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education (strongly or somewhat agree).	76	80	87	81

2. Growing Concerns about Access

There are signs that the public is becoming more troubled about access to higher education. This concern is especially widespread among parents of high school students and African Americans.

In three of our surveys, we asked our respondents if they believe that getting a college education has become more or less difficult compared to 10 years ago (see table 2). The percentage who say that getting a college education is more difficult has dropped from 55% when we first asked this question in 1993 to 47% today. In 2003, about half of the general public also believe that getting a college education is either about as difficult (30%) or less difficult (16%) than it was 10 years ago.

Table Two

	General Public			
	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %	1998 (n=700) %	1993 (n=502) %
<i>In your view, has getting a college education become more difficult than it was 10 years ago, less difficult than it was 10 years ago, or is it about as difficult as it was 10 years ago?</i>				
More difficult	47	NA	43	55
Less difficult	16	NA	18	12
About as difficult	30	NA	32	28

By this measure, then, public attitudes on college access have improved. Beneath the surface, however, we also see some growing concerns about access.

General Public. In each of our previous surveys, we asked our respondents to tell us whether the vast majority of people in their state who are qualified to go to college actually have the opportunity to do so (see table 3). When we first asked this question in 1993, we found a widespread concern about access to higher education. Six out of ten said that there are many people in their state who are qualified to go to college but do not have the opportunity to do so. In the intervening years, that percentage has dropped dramatically. In the 1998 and 2000 surveys, less than half felt this way. Today, concerns about access have returned, and the number of people who say that many qualified people cannot go to college has jumped up to 57%.

Table Three

<i>Do you believe that currently, in your state, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?</i>	General Public			
	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %	1998 (n=700) %	1993 (n=502) %
There are many people who don't have the opportunity	57	47	45	60
Vast majority have the opportunity	37	45	49	37

Parents of High School Students. Although the public in general may not be focused on issues concerning higher education, the parents of high school students presumably have a much greater stake in this topic. Not surprisingly, this group appears to be particularly sensitive to changes in access to higher education, and our most recent survey findings bear this out (see table 4). In 2000, just over half (52%) of high school parents said that the vast majority of qualified people do have an opportunity to attend college. In our most recent survey, the picture has changed. The percentage of high school parents who are optimistic about opportunity has dropped 18 points, with only 34% saying that the vast majority of qualified people in their state have the chance to go to college. Fifty-eight percent say there are many who do not have the chance.

Table Four

<i>Do you believe that currently, in your state, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?</i>	High School Parents	
	2003 (n=102) %	2000 (n=200) %
There are many people who don't have the opportunity	58	42
Vast majority have the opportunity	34	52

The survey results also suggest some possible reasons for this change. People who do not have children in high school do not necessarily follow what is going on with

financial aid, but it is reasonable to suppose that high school parents may be tracking this topic more closely. In 2000, we asked our respondents if they believed that “almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid.” At that time, more than 6 out of 10 high school parents (64%) either strongly or somewhat agreed with this statement. Today the number of high school parents who endorse that statement has fallen to 46%. In all likelihood, these high school parents are worried about finding the financial resources to send their own children to college, which may in turn have changed their views on access in general. A father in the Boston suburbs said it this way:

Three of our children have already graduated from college; we have one in college now, and one more in high school. It seems to be getting tougher with each one. It is becoming more expensive to go, more competitive to get in, and the scholarships are becoming less available.

African Americans. Concerns about access to higher education have also changed among African Americans (see table 5). Over the years, black respondents have been consistently more likely to be concerned about access. In 2000, 60% of African Americans said that many people in their state do not have an opportunity for higher education, as compared to a much smaller number of whites who felt this way (44%). But by the 2003 study, the level of concern among African Americans spiked, with 76% saying that many qualified people are shut out of higher education (compared to 51% among white respondents).

Table Five

	<i>African Americans</i>	
<i>Do you believe that currently, in your state, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?</i>	2003 (n=93) %	2000 (n=107) %
There are many people who don't have the opportunity	76	60
Vast majority have the opportunity	23	36

Hispanics. A majority of Hispanics consistently feel that many qualified people in their state do not have an opportunity to go to college (59% in 2000 and 67% in 2003). This difference is not statistically significant.

3. Attitudes about Social Class and Access

While the majority of people still think that students from middle-class families have at least as much opportunity as other students, there is a growing sense that middle-class opportunity is weakening.

Higher education critics sometimes say that paying for college is toughest for the middle class; they argue that minority students and students from poor families can get scholarships, well-to-do families can afford to pay the bills, but middle-class families are stuck in the middle. According to the critics, middle-class families have too much money to qualify for a scholarship but not enough to pay the bills. Partly in response to this concern, several states have increased the number of merit scholarships that, for all practical purposes, are targeted mostly to the middle class.

In several of our surveys, we asked a series of questions about college access for various economic and ethnic groups. Contrary to what many of the critics might expect, a substantial majority of the public in 2000 thought that students from middle-class families were doing well in terms of opportunity to get a college education (see table 6). Specifically, 82% said that qualified students from the middle class had about the same or more opportunity than other groups, as compared to 66% who said this about qualified students from ethnic or racial minorities, and 51% who said this about qualified students from low-income families.

Our most recent survey, however, shows a softening of this view, which may be driven by the fact that many middle-class families have felt the impact of unemployment and layoffs. Today, a larger number of people think that middle-class students have problems with college opportunity. For example, the percentage of people who say that qualified students from middle-class families have less opportunity for higher education than other groups was only 16% in the year 2000, but today that number has risen to 24%. This change in perception has taken place among blacks and whites, as well as people with household incomes over \$50,000. Conversely, the number of people who believe that middle-class students have more or about the same opportunity has fallen.

Table Six

	<i>General Public</i>		
	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %	1998 (n=700) %
<i>How about qualified students from MIDDLE-CLASS families, regardless of their ethnic background? Do they have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?</i>			
Less opportunity	24	16	24
More opportunity	17	22	13
About the same	56	60	62

Public attitudes about opportunity for low-income students or students from ethnic or racial minorities have remained stable during this period. The percentage of people who believe that qualified students from low-income families have less opportunity (46% in 2000 and 44% today) has not changed significantly. Likewise, the change in the percentage of people who say that students from ethnic/racial minorities have less opportunity (29% in 2000 and 27% in 2003) is also not significant.

Views of Various Demographic Groups. On this issue of access, there is some fluctuation among the attitudes of respondents in various subgroups of the population (see table 7). Here we note the differences that are statistically significant:

- ★ Hispanics give a better assessment of the place of minorities, at least relative to other groups. In 2003, 55% of Hispanics say that qualified students who are racial/ethnic minorities have the same opportunity to attend college as others, up from 40% who said this in 2000. But Hispanics have become less optimistic about access for qualified students from low-income families. The percentage of Hispanics who say that such students have more opportunity to go to college dropped from 24% in 2000 to a mere 5% today. These two findings might suggest that Hispanics are tending to define access more as an issue of class than as ethnicity.
- ★ People whose household income is more than \$50,000 per year tend to think low-income families are doing better on this front. In 2000, 51% of these respondents felt that qualified students from low-income families had less opportunity; that number has dropped to 39% today.
- ★ As we have noted, there is an overall change in how the public assesses middle-class opportunity. The largest changes in this view, however, come from three groups: parents of high school students, African Americans, and from families who make more than \$50,000 per year.

Table Seven

<i>Qualified students from middle-class families (regardless of their ethnic background) have less opportunity than others to get a college education.</i>	2003 %	2000 %
Parents of high school students	38 (n=102)	20 (n=200)
African Americans	30 (n=93)	10 (n=107)
Families with incomes over \$50,000	24 (n=260)	15 (n=290)

4. Older People Seeking Retraining

The public now thinks that older people returning to school for retraining are in a better position regarding access.

We have also tracked perceptions of opportunity for older people who are going back to school for retraining (see table 8). Here the picture is more positive. From the public's perspective, the situation of older people deteriorated somewhat between 1998 and 2000; in 1998, only 23% said older people have less opportunity to get a college education, compared to 37% in 2000. But the estimation of access for older workers has improved significantly in our most recent survey, dropping back to only 22% who say older people have less opportunity.

We cannot say for certain what accounts for this change, but there may be a number of reasons for it. On the one hand, with all of the unemployment and layoffs of the last few years, people may be more conscious of the opportunities for higher education that exist for nontraditional students. Many colleges and universities also have stepped up their advertising, which may have brought these programs to greater public awareness.

Table Eight

	<i>General Public</i>		
<i>How about people who are older and are going back to school for retraining? Do they have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?</i>	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %	1998 (n=700) %
Less opportunity	22	37	23
More opportunity	18	15	22
About the same	52	42	51

5. The Responsibility of Students

The belief that students should pay at least some of the cost of their education has declined somewhat.

In these surveys, we presented our respondents with the claim that students appreciate their college education only when they personally pay for part of the costs (see table 9). Typically we have found strong support for this view. In our previous surveys, the percentage of people who strongly or somewhat supported this view was always well above 70%. While the percentage of people who agree with this sentiment is still high, it has dropped to 69% in 2003, its lowest level throughout the 10-year period.

Table Nine

	General Public			
<i>Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs.</i>	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %	1998 (n=700) %	1993 (n=502) %
Net Agree	69	74	77	76
Strongly agree	40	47	48	48
Somewhat agree	29	27	29	28
Net Disagree	29	25	21	18
Somewhat disagree	19	16	13	10
Strongly disagree	10	8	8	8

It is, of course, impossible to say exactly what accounts for this change. Concerns about access seem to be the more pressing issue on people’s minds when it comes to higher education, so the worry about whether students will be making a contribution may seem less important to some. Some people may also be thinking that students themselves have less money, and may be less able to make a contribution.

6. Necessary for Success

Although the public has consistently stressed the importance of higher education, people have not always been as ready to insist that higher education is necessary for success. The number of people who think that a college education is a necessity has risen and the increase is particularly notable among African Americans and Hispanics.

General Public. As we have noted, large majorities of the general public have consistently emphasized the importance of higher education. In our most recent survey, 87% said that a high school graduate should go on to college rather than taking any decent job after high school, and 76% said that getting a college education is more important than it was 10 years ago. These percentages are virtually unchanged from our finding in previous surveys. We have also found that the public makes a distinction between the *importance* of higher education and the *necessity* of getting a college degree. Most people indicate that a college education is important, but we have also seen broad support for the idea that a college education is not necessarily the only path to success in the work world. In focus groups, people often point to Bill Gates—a college dropout who became the richest man in the world—as an example of the principle that one can be successful without a college degree.

In our 2000 study, 67% said that there are many ways to succeed in today’s work world without a college education, compared to only 31% who said that a college

education is necessary for success. Today that gap has narrowed somewhat, with 61% saying that there are many ways to succeed and 37% saying that a college degree is necessary. A growing and sizeable minority of the public, in other words, believe that college is essential for success in today’s work world. This increased perception of the necessity of a college education is notable in itself, but is of even greater concern when we remember that it is accompanied by an increase (from 47% to 57%) in the number of people who say that many qualified people do not have an opportunity to attend college. From the perspective of the general public, in other words, at the same time that more people are saying that college is a necessity, the number who are saying that college is inaccessible has also increased.

African Americans and Hispanics. The views of black Americans on this question have changed dramatically since our last survey. In 2000, the majority of African Americans (64%) said there are many ways to succeed at work without a college education, compared to 35% who said college is necessary (see table 10). Today the view of African Americans has changed, so that a majority (53%) now say that college is necessary for success, compared to 45% who say that there are many other paths to success in the work world.

Table Ten

<i>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?</i>	African Americans		Hispanics	
	2003 (n=93) %	2000 (n=107) %	2003 (n=86) %	2000 (n=100) %
College is necessary	53	35	53	41
There are many ways to succeed without a college education	45	64	41	57

The views of African Americans on the necessity of a college education are particularly striking when we relate them to attitudes about access. Fifty-three percent of African Americans say that college is essential for success at work, and an even larger majority (76%) believe that many qualified people in their state do not have an opportunity to attend college. In addition, 63% of black respondents feel that students from low-income families have less opportunity to attend college than others, and 56% also say that students from racial and ethnic minorities have less opportunity to attend college. Many African Americans believe, in other words, that this essential path to workplace success is closed for a large number of Americans, especially those from low-income and minority families. One African American woman from Joliet, Illinois, said it this way:

Higher education has gotten more important because of the job market. It is the way jobs are going, everyone wants a person who is educated. But things are tough now especially for African Americans. They don't live in an area where they are getting good schools, so they can't get the scholarships. The reason for that is their economic status. They are usually the low guy on the ladder, the last to get them when the promotions are given out, and the first to get the layoffs.

Hispanic attitudes have followed a similar pattern. In 2000, a majority (57%) said there are many ways to succeed without a college education, compared to only 41% who say this today.

7. Holding the Line on Price Increases

Recent discussions of higher education in Washington have raised issues about inefficiency and waste in higher education. Our studies do not suggest that the public is especially concerned about this issue at the moment.

In 2000, we asked the public whether they thought higher education was making an effort to keep prices down (see table 11). What we found was that a plurality (45%) said that they just did not know enough to answer our question—an unusually and notably high percentage of “don’t know” responses, indicating that people clearly do not know very much about the inner workings of colleges and universities. Still, 39% said colleges raise prices whenever they can and only 15% said that they thought colleges were working to keep prices down. When we revisited this question in 2003, the number who said they didn’t know dropped from 45% to 38% (still a tremendously high percentage); 43% maintain the position that colleges are raising prices whenever they can and 19% that colleges work to keep prices down.

Table Eleven

	General Public	
<i>Is it your sense that colleges and universities work hard to keep the price of college education down, or that they raise prices whenever they can to bring in more money, or don't you know enough to say?</i>	2003 (n=801) %	2000 (n=1,015) %
Work to keep the price down	19	15
Raise prices whenever they can	43	39
Don't know enough to say	38	45

Conclusion

Growing Importance of Higher Education, Concerns about Access

Our past studies have suggested that public attitudes are sensitive to the relationship between the perceived importance and necessity of higher education and perceptions of access. People are comfortable with the idea that a college education is becoming even more essential, as long as they feel that access to higher education keeps pace. It is likely to be more disturbing, however, when these two elements do not keep pace. The worst nightmare, of course, would be a situation where higher education is perceived as more essential yet less accessible.

Our most recent study suggests that while the overall picture remains positive, the country seems to be edging toward this unpleasant scenario. Different subgroups are making this move in a variety of ways. Among the general public, we have seen a small growth in the number who suggest that higher education is more important than it used to be and in the number who perceive difficulties with access. High school parents have not changed much in their high level of emphasis on the necessity of college, but they are now much more likely to say they are concerned about access than they were a few years ago. A growing number of Hispanics are concerned about the necessity of higher education. Larger numbers of African Americans have become more concerned about both access and necessity. Although the pattern in each group is slightly different, the overall direction is clear.

This dual emphasis may be found in the overall ratings that people give to the colleges in their state. In 2000, we found that the public gave relatively positive marks to their own state's colleges. Fifty-seven percent rated them as either excellent or good, compared to 15% who said fair or poor (28% said they did not know enough to say). Today those numbers have dropped slightly, with 53% giving a mark of excellent or good. While we cannot say definitely what has caused this change, it is once again interesting to turn to the views of African American respondents. As we have already seen, this group is more likely to emphasize the greater importance of college and its declining accessibility. African American evaluations of higher education have also dropped dramatically since our last survey. In 2000, colleges got high marks from African Americans, with 64% saying that colleges in their state were doing an excellent or good job. Today the number has dropped to 35%. This is the single largest change in the data we have seen between 2000 and 2003.

It is impossible to predict how these attitudes will change in the future. If the economy improves dramatically, anxiety may diminish. But there are indications that higher education will be feeling the pinch even after the economy starts to turn around—particularly if college prices continue to increase. In that case, we may see even greater levels of anxiety, especially among African Americans and among high school parents.

Appendix

Public Attitudes on Higher Education: A Trend Analysis, 1993 to 2003 is the fourth in a series of public opinion studies on the topic of higher education conducted over the past decade by Public Agenda for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education. Each of these studies was based on telephone surveys conducted with national random samples of adults. Nationwide samples were selected through a standard, random-digit-dialing technology whereby every household in the 48 contiguous states had an equal chance of being contacted.

- ★ The 2003 survey was conducted October 17 to 26, 2003, with a national random sample of 801 adults ages 18 or older. The data were weighted by urbanicity. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points.
- ★ *Great Expectations: How the Public and Parents—White, African American, and Hispanic—View Higher Education* (prepared by Public Agenda for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2000) was conducted December 2 to 14, 1999, with a national random sample of 1,015 adults ages 18 or older, and also includes 202 African American, 202 Hispanic, and 201 white parents of high school students. The margin of error for the national sample of 1,015 is plus or minus three percentage points; for the samples of 200 it is plus or minus seven percentage points.
- ★ *The Price of Admission: The Growing Importance of Higher Education* (prepared by Public Agenda for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 1998) was conducted February 2 to 8, 1998, with a national random sample of 700 adults ages 18 or over. The margin of error is plus or minus four percentage points.
- ★ *The Closing Gateway* (prepared by Public Agenda for the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 1993) was conducted August 1 to 9, 1993, with a national random sample of 502 adults ages 18 or over. The margin of error is plus or minus four percentage points.

This appendix includes data for survey questions asked in the four above-mentioned reports. Responses may not total 100% due to rounding. Combining answer categories may produce slight discrepancies between the numbers in these survey results and the numbers in the reports.

	2003 n=801 %	2000 n=1,015 %	1998 n=700 %	1993 n=502 %
Q1. Overall, how good a job are the COLLEGES in your state doing? Would you say they are doing an excellent, good, fair, or poor job, or don't you know enough to say?				
NET EXCELLENT/GOOD	53	57		
Excellent	14	15		
Good	38	42		
NET FAIR/POOR	17	15		
Fair	15	13		
Poor	3	3		
Don't know enough to say	30	28		
Q2. Compared to 10 years ago, would you say getting a college education today is more important, less important, or about the same as it was 10 years ago?*				
More important	76	77	75	
Less important	5	5	5	
About the same	18	17	20	
[Volunteer] Don't know	1	1	<0.5	
* In 1998, respondents were asked: "In your view, is getting a college education more important than it was 10 years ago, less important than it was 10 years ago, or is it about as important as it was 10 years ago?"				
Q3. In your view, is it possible for the U.S. to reach a point where too many people have a college degree, or is this one area where there can never be too much of a good thing?				
It is possible to reach a point	17	18		
Can never be too much	78	76		
[Volunteer] Don't know	5	6		
Q4. 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?				
College education is necessary	37	31		
Many ways to succeed without a college education	61	67		
[Volunteer] Don't know	2	3		
Q5. Which statement comes closer to your own view:				
High school graduates should go on to college because in the long run they'll have better job prospects	87		86	79
OR				
High school graduates should take any decent job offer they get because there are so many unemployed people already	9		9	13
[Volunteer] Don't know	4		5	7
Q6. Do you believe that currently, in your state, the vast majority of people who are qualified to go to college have the opportunity to do so, or do you think there are many people who are qualified to go but don't have the opportunity to do so?				
Vast majority have the opportunity	37	45	49	37
There are many people who don't have the opportunity	57	47	45	60
[Volunteer] Don't know	7	8	5	4

	2003 n=801 %	2000 n=1,015 %	1998 n=700 %	1993 n=502 %
Q7. In your view, has getting a college education become more difficult than it was 10 years ago, less difficult than it was 10 years ago, or is it about as difficult as it was 10 years ago?				
More difficult	47		43	55
Less difficult	16		18	12
About as difficult	30		32	28
[Volunteer] Don't know	7		7	5

Now, please tell me how much you agree or disagree with the following statements.
[PROBE: Is that strongly or somewhat?] [RANDOMIZE Q8-Q11]

Q8. 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.

NET AGREE	91	93	89	89
Strongly agree	73	78	66	70
Somewhat agree	18	15	23	19
NET DISAGREE	6	5	8	6
Somewhat disagree	3	3	5	3
Strongly disagree	3	2	3	2
[Volunteer] Neither agree nor disagree	NA	NA	1	4
[Volunteer] Don't know	3	2	2	1

Q9. Almost anyone who needs financial help to go to college can get loans or financial aid.

NET AGREE	62	62		
Strongly agree	35	33		
Somewhat agree	27	29		
NET DISAGREE	32	32		
Somewhat disagree	16	17		
Strongly disagree	16	15		
[Volunteer] Don't know	6	6		

Q10. Students have to borrow too much money to pay for their college education.*

NET AGREE	76	80	87	81
Strongly agree	55	56	50	47
Somewhat agree	22	24	37	34
NET DISAGREE	19	15	11	15
Somewhat disagree	13	11	8	10
Strongly disagree	6	4	3	5
[Volunteer] Don't know	4	5	1	4

* In 1998, the question set-up was: "I am going to read you several concerns about colleges and universities in (Insert State) which some people have talked about." In 1993, the question set-up was: "I am going to read you several concerns about (Insert State)'s public college system which some people have talked about." In both of these surveys, the actual question wording was: "Students are having to borrow too much money to pay for their college education. Please tell me whether you think it is a very serious problem, a somewhat serious problem, a not very serious problem, or not a problem at all."

	2003 n=801 %	2000 n=1,015 %	1998 n=700 %	1993 n=502 %
Q11. Students appreciate the value of a college education only when they have some personal responsibility for paying what it costs.*				
NET AGREE	69	74	77	76
Strongly agree	40	47	48	48
Somewhat agree	29	27	29	28
NET DISAGREE	29	25	21	18
Somewhat disagree	19	16	13	10
Strongly disagree	10	8	8	8
[Volunteer] Neither agree nor disagree	NA	NA	1	5
[Volunteer] Don't know	3	2	1	1
* In 1993, respondents were asked: "Students don't appreciate the value of a college education when they have no personal responsibility for paying what it costs."				
Q12. Is it your sense that colleges and universities work hard to keep the price of college education down, or that they raise prices whenever they can to bring in more money, or don't you know enough to say?				
Work to keep the price down	19	15		
Raise prices whenever they can	43	39		
Don't know enough to say	38	45		
Q13. Now I'd like to know if you think qualified students from LOW-INCOME families—regardless of ethnic background—have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?				
Less opportunity	44	46	49	
More opportunity	14	15	13	
About the same	38	36	36	
[Volunteer] Don't know	4	4	2	
Q14. How about qualified students from MIDDLE-CLASS families, regardless of their ethnic background? Do they have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?				
Less opportunity	24	16	24	
More opportunity	17	22	13	
About the same	56	60	62	
[Volunteer] Don't know	4	2	2	
Q15. How about qualified students who are ethnic or racial minorities, such as blacks or Latinos? Do they have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?				
Less opportunity	27	29	28	
More opportunity	22	25	21	
About the same	45	41	49	
[Volunteer] Don't know	6	5	3	

	2003 n=801 %	2000 n=1,015 %	1998 n=700 %	1993 n=502 %
Q16. How about people who are OLDER and are going back to school for retraining? Do they have less opportunity, more opportunity, or about the same opportunity as others to get a college education?				
Less opportunity	22	37	23	
More opportunity	18	15	22	
About the same	52	42	51	
[Volunteer] Don't know	8	6	4	
Q17. Are you the parent or guardian of any children who are under 18 years old, or not?				
Yes	34			
No	66			
Q18. Are you the parent or guardian of any children currently attending high school, or not?				
Yes	14	17		
No	87	83		
Q19. Are you the parent or guardian of any children who were enrolled in college in the last five years?				
Yes	23	24		
No	77	76		
Q20. What is the highest level of school you completed?				
Less than high school	8	8	6	5
High school graduate	25	32	27	29
Some college or trade school, no degree	22	22	33	26
Associate's or 2-year degree	11	9	NA	8
Bachelor's or 4-year degree	21	19	19	20
Graduate/Professional degree	13	11	15	11
[Volunteer] Don't know	0	0	0	<0.5
Q21. What is your age?				
18-29	20	18		
30-39	16	23		
40-49	17	22		
50-59	22	17		
60+	25	21		
[Volunteer] Don't know	<0.5	<0.5		

	2003 n=801 %	2000 n=1,015 %	1998 n=700 %	1993 n=502 %
Q22. I'm going to read some ranges of annual household income. Please stop me when you hear the category that best describes your total household income before taxes in [previous year].				
\$15,000 or under	9	9		
\$15,001 to \$25,000	15	16		
\$25,001 to \$35,000	16	18		
\$35,001 to \$50,000	18	22		
\$50,001 to \$75,000	18	17		
Over \$75,000	22	15		
[Volunteer] Don't know	2	4		
Q23. Do you consider yourself Hispanic, white, black or African American, Asian or something else?				
Hispanic	11	10	4	5
White	73	75	84	84
Black/African American	10	11	9	8
Asian	1	1	1	1
[Volunteer] Native American	1	1	NA	NA
Something else [Specify]	3	2	3	1
[Volunteer] Don't know	<0.5	<0.5	<0.5	1
Gender				
Male	48	49	48	47
Female	52	51	52	53

About the Author

John Immerwahr is a senior research fellow with Public Agenda and associate vice president for academic affairs at Villanova University. He is 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). In addition, he has authored and co-authored a number of other Public Agenda reports on education, including *First Things First: What Americans Expect from the Public Schools* (1994).

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. Public Agenda's particular expertise lies in crafting research studies that explore different points of view with empathy and that probe beneath surface responses to capture the public's concerns and assumptions. Our in-depth research on how citizens think about policy forms the basis for extensive citizen education work. Our citizen education materials have won praise for their credibility and fairness from elected officials from both political parties and from experts and decision makers across the political spectrum. Our Web site, Public Agenda Online, provides comprehensive information on a wide range of public opinion and public policy issues.

Public Agenda now has available an online Higher Education Issue Guide, which is an excellent source of facts and figures and unbiased information and analysis on a wide range of critical higher education issues, including affirmative action, education financing, Title IX, and much more.

6 East 39th Street, New York, NY 10016
Telephone: 212-686-6610 Fax: 212-889-3461

www.publicagenda.org



About 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 poised to improve higher education policy.

Established in 1998, the National Center is not affiliated with any institution of higher education, with any political party, or with any government agency; it receives continuing core financial support from a consortium of national foundations that includes The Pew Charitable Trusts, The Atlantic Philanthropies, and The Ford Foundation.

152 North Third Street, Suite 705, San Jose, California 95112

Telephone: 408-271-2699 Fax: 408-271-2697

www.highereducation.org

