What's AHEAD
KEY TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

CLOSING GAPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION ATTAINMENT

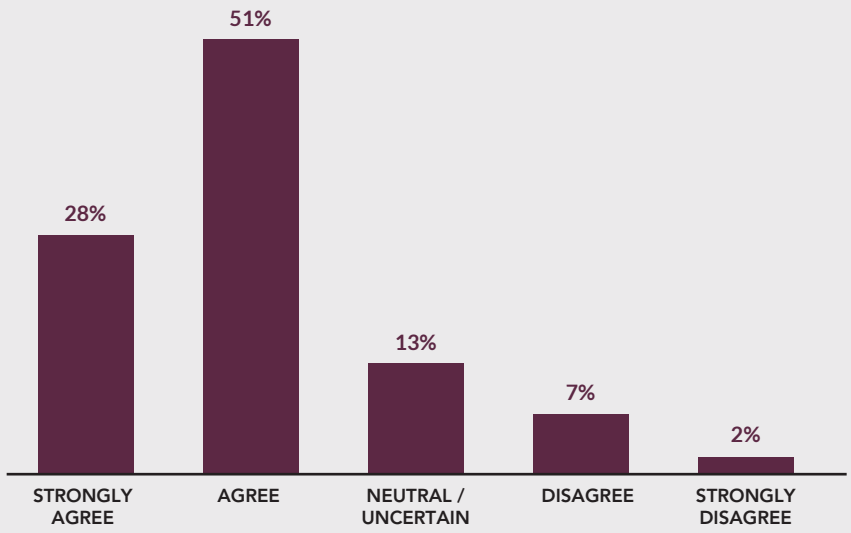
What's AHEAD draws on the expertise of higher education trend-spotters to offer insights into important issues in higher education management. In this poll, we asked higher education leaders to share their views about differences across groups in higher education attainment.

Although most higher education leaders agree that closing the gaps in higher education attainment is a bigger concern now than a year ago, nearly all also agree that college leaders can do more to close the gaps. Higher education leaders have varying views about the "single most important action" that will close gaps in attainment based on family income. Most believe that college leaders have insufficient incentives and resources to close the gaps.

Closing Gaps in Attainment Is a Bigger Concern Now Than a Year Ago

Most respondents (79%) agree or strongly agree that closing gaps in higher education attainment is a bigger concern now than a year ago.

FIG. 1 **Agreement Among Higher Education Leaders That Closing Gaps in Attainment Is a Bigger Concern Now Than a Year Ago**



College Leaders Should Do More to Close the Gaps

Nearly all respondents (92%) believe that leaders of higher education institutions should do more to close gaps in higher education attainment.

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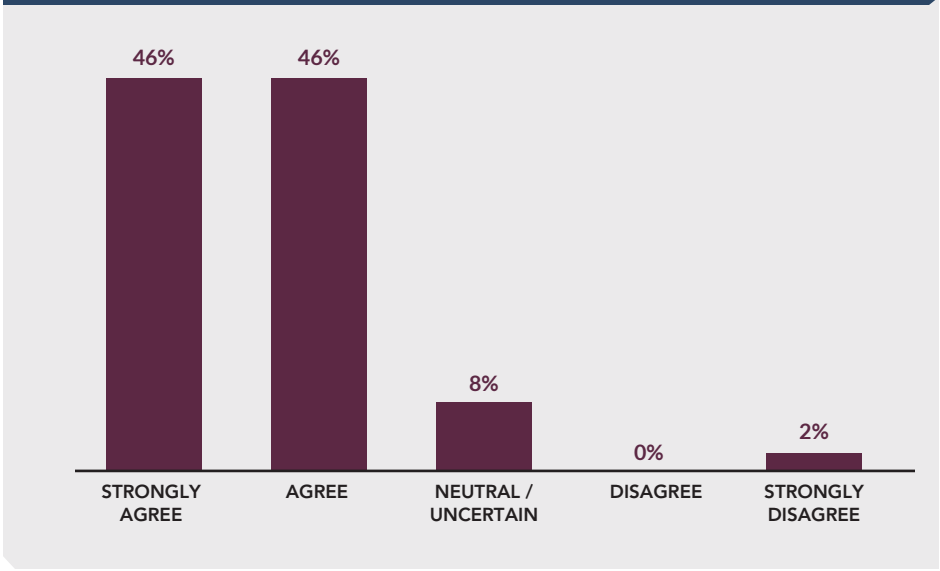
FIG. 2 **Agreement That Leaders of Higher Education Institutions Should Do More to Close Gaps in Higher Education Attainment**

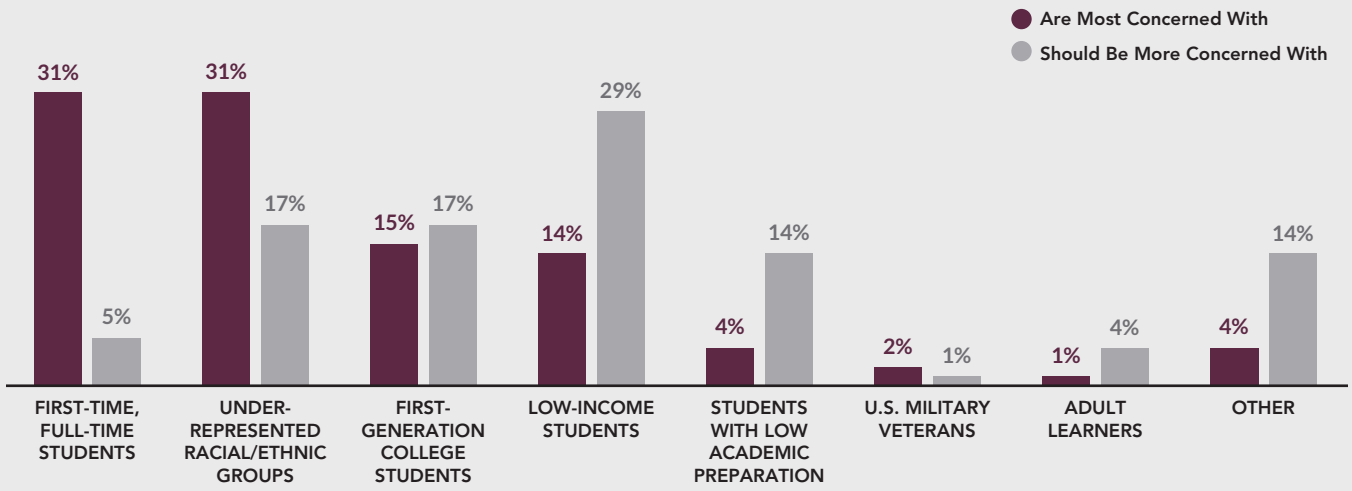


College Leaders Should Be More Concerned With Improving Attainment Among a Number of Different Groups

Respondents believe that college leaders are most concerned about improving attainment of first-time, full-time students (reported by 31% of respondents) and students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (31%). Just 14% of respondents believe that college leaders are most concerned with improving attainment of low-income students.

Respondents offer varying views about the group for which college leaders should be more concerned about improving attainment. The most common responses are low-income students (29%), first-generation college students (17%), and students from historically underrepresented racial/ethnic groups (17%). "Other" groups include transfer students, students with disabilities, and, most commonly, "all of the above." As one respondent wrote, "All of these groups are important. I found it impossible to choose just one!"

FIG. 3 **Groups that College Leaders Are Most Concerned About—and Should Be More Concerned About—Improving Attainment**



Respondents Stress the Role of Insufficient Academic Preparation

About half (49%) of responding higher education leaders report that the single most important reason why college attainment is lower for students from lower- than higher-income families is insufficient academic preparation or readiness for college.

FIG. 4 **The Most Important Reason Why College Attainment Is Lower for Students from Lower- than Higher-Income Families**

ACTION	PERCENT
Insufficient academic preparation and readiness for college	**49%**
Insufficient understanding of reasons for differences in outcomes	**16%**
High cost/price of college	**14%**
Insufficient institutional resources	**5%**
Insufficient institutional leadership	**2%**
Insufficient political leadership	**1%**
Other	**13%**

Respondents Have Varying Views of the Most Important Actions for Improving Attainment of Low-Income Students

Respondents are divided about the most important action leaders of higher education institutions can take to raise attainment of low-income students. The most common responses are: improving college affordability (e.g., by reducing costs of attendance, increasing financial aid, or reducing loan burden) and improving formal and informal mentorship (e.g., from peers, faculty, and/or administrators). Less commonly reported actions are improving pathways toward degree attainment (e.g., via credit transfers, flexibility in changing degree plans), using data to inform institutional action (e.g., data analytics, "early warning" systems), and academic supports (e.g., tutoring, supplemental instruction).

Some respondents pushed back on the question noting that there is not one action that will improve attainment. These respondents note that a comprehensive approach is required. Representing this view, one respondent wrote, "The 'single' most important action is to weave several very important actions together. Thinking in single-action terms is a recipe for defeat."

FIG. 5 **The Most Important Action College Leaders Can Take to Improve Attainment for Low-Income Students Is to Improve:**

ACTION	PERCENT
College affordability	**22%**
Formal and informal mentorship	**21%**
Pathways toward degree attainment	**13%**
Use of data to inform institutional action	**12%**
Academic supports	**11%**
Campus and social engagement opportunities	**3%**
Academic advising	**2%**
Other	**16%**

Most Respondents Disagree That College Leaders Have Sufficient Incentives or Resources to Improve Attainment

Most respondents (62%) disagree or strongly disagree that college leaders have sufficient incentives to improve attainment of students from low-income families from federal or state policymakers, institutional stakeholders and/or other sources. In their comments, respondents offered such suggestions as creating incentives for student progress (e.g., "have higher standards for satisfactory academic progress tied to continued aid"), rewarding institutional "success" (e.g., "federal and state grants that reward student success programs that yield results"), and encouraging particular institutional activities (e.g., "incentives for targeted supplementary education initiatives").

Most (73%) respondents disagree or strongly disagree that college leaders have sufficient resources to improve attainment of low-income students. Respondents most commonly called for more resources for student financial aid and more resources to increase academic and personal support staff and services.

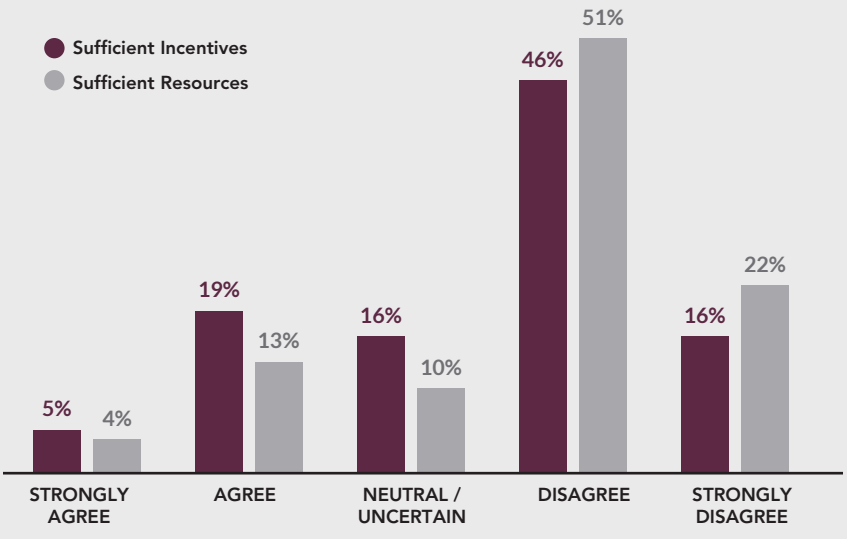
Some noted that the challenges of improving attainment of low-income students are especially great at open-access and minority serving institutions. In the words of one respondent:

> *It will take much more resources (people, money, time) to overcome the many and huge disadvantages that low-income students as a whole bring to the table. It is definitely achievable for some well-endowed colleges/universities now but the preponderance of colleges/universities just do not have the necessary resources at this time.*

A few respondents called for a more comprehensive approach as well as an approach that recognizes the roles of multiple stakeholders. Reflecting this view, one respondent wrote, "Higher Education cannot do this alone. Critical partnerships are needed with government and K-12."

A small but noteworthy share of respondents implied that institutions now have sufficient resources and incentives. These respondents call for greater institutional leadership, with representative comments calling for "courage," "cultural and policy shifts away from climbing the prestige ladder," reallocation of resources, and greater understanding of low-income students among faculty. One respondent called for leaders to be more proactive, writing: "Most change in higher education takes way too long. We have to find a way to be responsive to students, the market, emerging technologies and products, etc., but also we need to be proactive, not just reactive."

FIG. 6 **Agreement That Leaders of Higher Education Institutions Have Sufficient Incentives and Resources to Improve Attainment of Low-Income Students**



About This Poll

Members of the What's AHEAD trend-spotter panel were invited to participate in the poll (n = 368). The panel is made up of higher education leaders, including alumni of the Executive Doctorate program in Higher Education Management at the University of Pennsylvania, and members of NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. We received 134 responses during the 9-day period in which the poll was open (May 10 through 18, 2016): 111 of 248 Executive Doctorate alumni, 20 members of NASPA, and 3 other higher education leaders. About half (52%) of respondents work at private not-for-profit four-year institutions, 20% work at public four-year institutions, 8% at public two-year institutions, 2% at for-profit institutions, 3% at non-US based universities, and less than 1% in administrative units (e.g., system offices). The remaining respondents (14%) work in organizations other than colleges and universities. More than a third (36%) of respondents hold positions that focus on administration, 26% on academic matters, 19% in student affairs, 4% in finance, and 15% in other areas.

Suggested Citation

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About AHEAD

The **Alliance for Higher Education and Democracy (AHEAD)** is dedicated to advancing higher education policy and practice that fosters open, equitable, and democratic societies. Drawing on the intellectual resources of the University of Pennsylvania and a global alliance of higher education and academic leaders, AHEAD achieves its mission by creating knowledge, improving practice, and building capacity. Through our engagement with policymakers, institutional leaders, scholars and practitioners, AHEAD produces research and applies research-based knowledge to address the most pressing issues pertaining to the public purposes of higher education in the U.S. and around the globe. For more information see: www.ahead-penn.org

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