

# FACING WHAT AILS US HEAD ON: Public Consensus on a New Direction for Higher Education

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Once viewed as a sound investment in a better life, many Americans now see higher education as an expensive gamble. While benefits still exist, people are continuing to lose faith that a college education is worth the money and time or that it pays off in the job market. Colleges and universities — and the states that oversee them — need to step up, adapt, create a path to affordability and answer the very legitimate concerns that the public is expressing. In a divided nation, we must embrace the public consensus on these points and face head on the need for a stronger return on investment to reverse steep enrollment declines and avoid state disinvestment in higher education.

## Despite Common Ground on the Importance of College, Perceived Value Is Eroding

The American public knows that college can help people advance in their careers. Across the political spectrum, people believe that all Americans should have the opportunity to get a college degree if they want one.<sup>1</sup> Hispanic, Latino and Black parents traditionally have held the highest expectations for their children (85%), with white parents following closely (74%). Before the pandemic, Black parents' expectations for their children increased 20 percentage points between 2017 and 2019.<sup>2</sup> Yet, by spring 2021, just 67% of Black parents and 56% of Hispanic and Latino parents expressed wanting their



*CONCERNS ABOUT THE HIGH COST OF COLLEGE, WEAK CONNECTIONS TO THE EMPLOYMENT SECTOR, AND THE BURDEN OF STUDENT DEBT HAVE LED TO A STEEPER DROP IN THE PUBLIC'S CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS THAN FOR ANY OTHER MAJOR U.S. INSTITUTIONS THAT GALLUP MEASURES.<sup>4</sup>*

child to attend a four-year college. Notably, half of parents, overall, want more noncollege paths for their children.<sup>3</sup>

About half of U.S. adults (51%) now consider a college education to be “very important,” down from 70% in 2013.<sup>5</sup> Partisan differences are real and growing; a gap of 24 percentage points exists between Democrats and Republicans who express a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education.<sup>6</sup>

Republicans and Independents who lean Republican are much more likely today to say that colleges have a negative effect on the nation, with as many as 6 in 10 holding this opinion.<sup>7</sup>

Most pronounced — and very troublesome — are the lower levels of confidence in the benefits of higher education among young adults ages 18 to 30.<sup>8</sup> Skepticism is particularly pronounced for those without college degrees. These young people are voting with their feet. The percentage of recent high school graduates who enroll in college has dropped substantially in the past several years — a trend that COVID exacerbated and that has not substantially rebounded in its wake.<sup>9</sup>

Higher education leaders and influencers have blinders on. We are blaming partisan politics and tweaking practices at the margins, and these strategies are not working. How do we know? Regardless of race, ethnicity, income, geography or political affiliation, the public is telling us that higher education is increasingly inaccessible, unaffordable and disconnected from the skills needed to get and keep good jobs.<sup>10</sup> Colleges and universities — the backbone of the nation’s pathway to economic opportunity — are stuck in the past.<sup>11</sup>



*DOWNPLAYING PARTISAN DISAGREEMENTS OR FRAMING THE PUBLIC AS UNINFORMED WILL ONLY EXACERBATE THIS CRISIS. INSTEAD, WE MUST FACE THE PUBLIC’S CRITICISMS HEAD ON.*

## The Imperative to Face the Public’s Criticisms Head On

We are about to enter a full-blown crisis, both for our higher education institutions and for society as a whole.

The public’s criticisms align with six hard truths that are supported by broad and convincing evidence:

### BURDEN

College costs continue to rise, and students bear a heavy burden.

### INEQUALITY

College is increasingly becoming a driver of inequality by failing more than 50% of students.

### RESOURCES

States do not deploy their resources to get equitable results.

### TALENT

Employers’ talent needs are not recognized in state and federal budgets.

### ROI

Return on investment is not sufficient.

### NEEDS

Adults need something markedly different than what most public colleges and universities offer.

## ***College costs continue to rise, and students bear a heavy burden.***

The cost of delivering credentials is increasing, but state investment is not sufficient to protect students from escalating prices. Most Americans (83%) see college costs as prohibitive for low-income students. Two-thirds think college is too expensive and time consuming for working adults. Most think debt accrual and inadequate financial aid for both low- and middle-income students are serious problems.<sup>12</sup>

These concerns are well founded. Even with increases in grant aid, students' cost of attendance increased faster than inflation in community colleges, public four-year institutions, and private four-year institutions between 2006-07 and 2019-20. At the same time, from the peak of the Great Recession, the unemployment rate for adults with no college plunged steeply, making it easier for those who didn't want to pay the higher college prices to get jobs. These higher costs are increasingly being passed on to students through higher tuition and fees. Net tuition as a share of total higher education revenue has grown from 20.9% in 1980 to 42.1% in 2021. Through whatever combination of strategies, the expense of earning a valuable credential must be reduced and become within reach of the Americans who have dropped out of college or are not currently enrolled.<sup>13</sup>

In all states, tuition and fees have risen steadily as state appropriations comprise smaller percentages of the total cost of college. State appropriations bills reveal that funding for public higher education is treated as an expenditure item, not as an investment. For this reason, states looking to balance their budget target higher education first.<sup>14</sup> The result? After steep declines in state investments during the 2002 and 2009 recessions, state appropriations per student still have not recovered to pre-recession levels. When excluding federal stimulus funding and adjusting for inflation, 10 states had declines in education appropriations per full-time equivalent in the two-year sector and 27 states had declines in education appropriations per full-time equivalent in the four-year sector in 2021.<sup>15</sup>

Growth in financial aid has lessened the burden of higher tuition for some students in some states and, in the last several years, tuition and fees comprise a slightly lower proportion of college revenue than in the past. Yet many students in need of assistance do not qualify or cannot navigate complex financial aid systems and rules. By some estimates, low-income students graduating in 2021 missed out on over \$3.75 billion in free financial aid because they never filled out the mandatory federal application form.<sup>16</sup>

## ***College is increasingly becoming a driver of inequality by failing more than 50% of students.***

Nationwide, most first-generation, Black, Hispanic and Latino students start their college education at a community college; only 42% of them complete a credential within six years.<sup>17</sup> Three-quarters of students who start but do not complete college are first-generation students.<sup>18</sup> Roughly 4 in 10 people with college debt had no degree after six years of enrolling full time in college.<sup>19</sup> Nearly half of Black borrowers default on their student loans within 12 years, as will roughly 30% of all borrowers.<sup>20</sup>

## ***States do not deploy their resources to get equitable results.***

Taxpayer dollars are not driving more equitable access, affordability, timely completion and work-connected outcomes. Selective public and private universities that enjoy substantial taxpayer investments enroll too few Pell, Black, Hispanic and Latino students. These taxpayer-subsidized institutions are allowed to act as gatekeepers to the high-status credentials and to the professional networks that yield the nation's highest compensating and powerful jobs and industries.<sup>21</sup> Public research universities receive substantial state taxpayer dollars and spend far more per student and generate far more revenue overall than do more affordable and accessible community and technical colleges and regional comprehensive universities. They charge higher tuition to in-state students and chase affluent out-of-state students to take limited seats at a premium price.<sup>22</sup> In short, taxpayer-supported

institutions that enroll the largest number of first-generation students and students of color are the least resourced. Research shows that spending per student is directly related to student outcomes, particularly in open access institutions.<sup>23</sup>

In just 10 states do public institutions receive a significant amount of funding based on whether students from different ethnic and racial groups attain their degree. Only the Texas State Technical College System receives state funding based primarily on whether its graduates earn higher salaries than adults with only a high school diploma. While research is advancing, no systematic way of understanding what it costs to graduate students on time and ready for work yet exists.<sup>24</sup> However, we know from return-on-investment studies that effective strategies cost more upfront to deliver but yield far more graduates.<sup>25</sup>

This inequitable funding tracks with low public confidence. Public Agenda finds that only 20% of

Americans say their state's most prominent and selective public university helps students get an education in a timely, cost-effective manner. Only 26% say such institutions are a worthwhile investment for students and families. Only 25% say these universities are a worthwhile investment of public funds because they improve business conditions and attract employers.

### ***Employers' talent needs are not recognized in state and federal budgets.***

The need for employees with workforce-aligned skills and credentials is growing urgent. Businesses cannot meet customer demands and industries cannot grow with the current talent crisis. Three-quarters of U.S. businesses report they are struggling to fill positions.<sup>28</sup>



## Opportunities & Obstacles:

### California's Model

California presents an interesting case study in the need to better understand what strategic investment looks like. On one hand, the state has the highest number of public colleges that promote economic mobility – measured by several reputable analyses of the number of years required for low-income students to pay back the expense of earning a degree.<sup>26</sup> Yet graduation rates in its community colleges are low, and California, the first state in the nation in which whites comprise less than half of the population, has woefully too few Hispanics, Latinos and Blacks completing a postsecondary credential and getting good jobs to maintain a robust and diverse middle class.<sup>27</sup>



*ONLY 21% SAY THEIR STATE'S MOST PROMINENT AND SELECTIVE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY IS A WORTHWHILE INVESTMENT OF PUBLIC FUNDS BECAUSE IT INCREASES OPPORTUNITY FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS AND STUDENTS OF COLOR.<sup>29</sup>*



*YET INVESTMENT IN WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT, INCLUDING FUNDING FOR PUBLIC COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES AND FINANCIAL AID AND TRAINING VOUCHERS, IS A RELATIVELY LOW PRIORITY IN A SEA OF COMPETING STATE PRIORITIES.<sup>30</sup>*

When \$5 trillion was infused into the U.S. economy to grapple with the global pandemic, just 1% (\$76 billion) of federal COVID relief funds were allocated for workforce priorities and higher education institutions despite the fact that the public strongly supports maintaining funding of public higher education institutions “even during hard economic times.”<sup>31</sup>

### ***Return on investment is not sufficient.***

When viewed through the public’s lens of its core value — affordable education that leads to good jobs and better lives — the higher education business model no longer reliably delivers. Only half of bachelor’s degree holders can affirm three outcomes: “My education was worth the cost,” “My college or university helped me achieve my goals,” and “I earn significantly more (greater than 20%) than my peers who just completed high school.” Hispanic, Latino, Asian, and Black males are less likely than white males to report positive outcomes; females are less likely to do so across all racial groups.<sup>32</sup> Public perceptions align with reports from a substantial proportion of employers: 4 in 10

do not believe that all or most college graduates possess the knowledge and skills needed for entry-level positions; fewer believe they possess the knowledge and skills required for advancement and promotion.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Adults need something markedly different than what most public colleges and universities offer.***

The so-called traditional college education — full-time residential enrollment, time to explore academic offerings with few to no family or work obligations — is a mirage for adult students.<sup>34</sup> According to Public Agenda’s research, 63% of Americans say getting a college education is too expensive and too time consuming for working adults. At the same time, however, 86% say getting a college education can help working adults advance their careers. In other words, people recognize the potential benefits of college for working adults, but they see college as out of reach for too many.<sup>35</sup> Not surprisingly, in a season of enrollment declines, enrollment is way up at Arizona State University, Western Governors University and Southern New Hampshire University. Each of these institutions has invested in meeting the needs of adults and employers and designed intentionally adult-centered, job-connected models of education with a national reach.<sup>36</sup>

## **A Common-Ground Agenda Is Needed to Develop Talent and Ensure Economic Opportunity**

Strong cross-partisan majorities believe that if more people in their state had a college education, two things would happen: states would be better able to attract high-quality employers, and people would be better able to earn a good living.<sup>37</sup> Americans want colleges and universities to prioritize three outcomes: increased affordability, equal opportunity and

career-relevant skills.<sup>38</sup> To fortify public confidence in higher education, reverse enrollment declines and protect state investment in talent development, our way forward should be anchored by what the public tells us it values. To that end, we must:



### ***Provide affordable and effective educational options beyond high school.***

Public confidence, as well as concrete evidence of college value, will not improve unless we acknowledge and act on the college cost problem. Since the Great Recession, two-thirds of adults say college affordability is a “very big national problem.”<sup>39</sup> Just 9% of Americans believe a quality and affordable education is available to all who want it.<sup>40</sup>

Yet the cost of college continues to rise. Through declining enrollment, the public is telling us we have hit our tuition ceiling and exceeded our tolerance to borrow deeply for uncertain post-graduation outcomes. Controlling costs will require substantial

reforms in college and universities’ business models and a radical revisiting of how we recognize and credential learning that occurs outside the classroom.

### ***Create clear pathways to meaningful credentials for new and returning students.***

Uncertainty looms large among young adults who have dropped out of college or never pursued college. Prospective students fear failure – and for good reason, given the low completion rates and the high percentage of students without a degree to show for their debt (upwards of 4 in 10 students).<sup>41</sup> To return to college, adults with an associate degree or less need flexible schedules, credit for prior learning, financial aid, work-based learning and confidence in



career advancements.<sup>42</sup> Public Agenda finds strong cross-partisan support for state investments at public institutions for creating flexible short-term credential programs; providing students with job experience while they learn; developing partnerships with K-12 systems so students graduate from high school with college credits; hiring more faculty so students can take the classes they need to graduate on time; and tailoring curricula to meet employers’ needs.<sup>43</sup>

This means that the structured credential pathways we know lead to higher completion rates need to be adapted and linked to the concrete needs of adult learners and the businesses that employ them. Employers are more likely to hire graduates who have work-based learning experiences, and graduates enjoy higher earnings when they have had these opportunities.<sup>44</sup> To strengthen the linkages

between the worlds of college and work, we must place post-graduate outcomes at the center of a wholesale program and curriculum review; an expansion and greater crediting of work-based learning opportunities; and continuous career advising and networking.

***Increase, coordinate and target resources to afford more equitable opportunity and a better return on investment.***

Majorities of adults with varying ethnic and racial backgrounds and across political affiliations support state investments to improve college access, affordability and degree completion for Black, Hispanic and Latino students. Half or more of Democrats, Independents and Republicans support increasing taxes on wealthy households to make community college free and make public higher education more affordable. Two-thirds or more of Democrats, Independents and Republicans support tax incentives to encourage employers to pay employees' tuition. They also are in favor of state governments offering interest-free student loans and students paying back loans based on post-graduate earnings.<sup>45</sup> Employers need to invest directly in postsecondary institutions to help develop the diverse talent they directly benefit from hiring.

Colleges need taxpayers to invest in strategies that work to improve completion and job readiness.<sup>46</sup> And states need to deploy greater proportions of higher education dollars to the institutions best positioned to spur upward mobility and a ticket to the middle class for low-income students and students of color: community colleges and open-access four-year universities.

***Communicate honestly and clearly to drive change.***

To increase public confidence and build will for the changes needed in higher education, we need to stop making excuses and explaining away real concerns. Colleges and universities, policymakers and policy influencers must internalize public sentiment and uncomfortable data and act on it. Through credible, diverse messengers, we need to describe the system we seek to create for American learners. This communication should be clear, without jargon or buzzwords. For example, easily understood messages such as "right pathways, right prices," "earn as you go," or "individuals prepared for today and tomorrow" reflect the changes that higher education is committed to making to restore public confidence in the value of college and re-center it as a primary pillar of American society.<sup>47</sup>



## Too Valuable to Squander

“Students experience postsecondary value when provided equitable access and support to complete quality, affordable credentials that offer economic mobility and prepare them to advance racial and economic justice in our society.”

The Postsecondary Value Commission, 2021<sup>48</sup>

“It’s money wasted and time wasted. I think college is very overrated and overpriced... Universities would have more people enrolled and stay in college if it was very affordable.”

Black Independent from Tennessee in her 20s, with some college experience but no degree, 2022<sup>49</sup>

The abiding belief in the American Dream and the central role that our colleges and universities play in it are too valuable to squander. The talent inherent in the American people is too vast and essential not to cultivate with an affordable, accessible and effective network of public colleges and universities. Yet as college costs rise and return on investment drops in the eyes of too many, public confidence and public investment will continue to erode absent major changes. Change is coming to industries that face severe labor and equity gaps, including cybersecurity, where one in three jobs is open and more than 80% of the workforce is white and male. Notably, some employers are beginning to move beyond the four-year degree in their hiring practices to broaden employment opportunities to more Americans.<sup>50</sup>



We need to think differently about what a postsecondary education is and what it should be. Yes, the so-called traditional college experience — particularly for the first-generation, Black, Hispanic or Latino student who attends a liberal arts college or a comprehensive research institution full time — is an important part of the mix. Yet so must be the flexible, accessible pathway for the working adult who completes a short-term certificate program in a high-demand field — thanks in part to support from an employer and a state scholarship or no-interest loan — can get started in a rewarding career with a credential that counts toward a degree. Bipartisan, common-ground consensus exists on how we serve them both; we just need to act decisively, guided by the public’s vision for how higher education can better support a more just and prosperous nation.<sup>51</sup>

## About the Authors

Kristin D. Hultquist is a first-generation college graduate who served as a senior advisor in George W. Bush's Administration. Kate Shaw is a first-generation college graduate who served as Pennsylvania Deputy Secretary of Postsecondary Education under Governor Ed Rendell. From different political parties, they advocated for federal and state policies that would empower leaders and improve higher education opportunities and outcomes. They continue to do so as colleagues at HCM Strategists. Raquel Simental and Jessica Rodriguez Boudreau are first-generation college graduates and children of immigrants who have dedicated their careers to the advocacy of public policies and systems that promote economic mobility for first-generation students and students from historically marginalized communities.

## Acknowledgements

This brief captures the lived experiences, professional insights and values of our team at HCM Strategists. It is with gratitude we acknowledge our colleagues: Terrell Halaska Dunn, Cindi Williams, Martha Snyder, Christopher Mathias, Jessica Collis and Nicole Basurto Brown. Thank you, Gretchen Cheney and Karen Glass, for helping clarify our thinking with your project and editing support, and Claudette Contreras for your design sensibility in elevating this brief. We are stronger together.

The authors want to thank Ruth Watkins, Dave Clayton and Courtney McBeth of Strada Education Network; Stephanie Marken of Gallup; Dave Winston and Caitlin Peartree of The Winston Group; Paul Fain and Elyse Ashburn of WorkShift; and Francesca Jarosz Brady and Emily Sandberg of VOX Communications for the conversations, research and draft reviews that inform this final brief.

The authors acknowledge the public opinion research and insights offered by our colleagues David Schleifer, Will Friedman and Andrew Seligsohn at Public Agenda. Their new opinion research and report, *America's Hidden Common Ground on Public Higher Education*, is the impetus for this brief. Thank you for believing with us in the power of the bipartisan and nonpartisan common ground to envision and advance change.

Finally, the authors appreciate Kevin Corcoran of Lumina Foundation and Travis Reindl of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for supporting HCM Strategists' vision of elevating the voice of people, through public opinion research, communications and advocacy, in efforts to improve how higher education serves the nation's interests. Their long-time collaboration with us paves the way to face head on our necessary bipartisan work with states, colleges and universities, and employers.

## About HCM Strategists

HCM Strategists, founded in 2008, is an impact-driven consulting firm that believes in the transformative power of education and work-based learning to improve social and economic mobility for communities that have been marginalized or historically underserved. Our work delivers a consequential impact on the national narrative, policy options and leaders responsible for change.

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