

GALLUP®



The College Reality Check

What Students Experience vs.
What America Believes



A photograph of a classroom with several students sitting at desks. In the foreground, a young man in a pink shirt is pointing towards the right. Behind him, a young woman in a yellow shirt is looking at a laptop. Further back, a young man in a striped shirt and a young woman in an orange shirt are also visible. The image is overlaid with a light gray grid and several semi-transparent green squares of varying sizes and shades, scattered across the scene.

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Introduction and Key Findings

Gallup's measurement of public confidence in higher education reveals a widening gap between Americans' concerns about colleges and universities and the experiences reported by current students. After Gallup first measured [public confidence in higher education](#), Americans' trust in colleges and universities entered a decade-long decline. Fifty-seven percent of U.S. adults expressed "a great deal" or "quite a lot" of confidence in higher education in 2015, but by 2024, that percentage had dropped to 36%. At that time, nearly as many adults said they had little or no confidence in higher education (32%) as said they were highly confident in it.

In 2025, public attitudes showed signs of recovery, with 42% of respondents reporting a great deal or quite a lot of confidence in higher education; still, nearly one in four U.S. adults continue to express significant reservations about college. Moreover, confidence breaks sharply along party lines: 26% of Republican adults are highly confident in higher education, compared to 41% of independents and 61% of Democrats.

In response to this trend, Gallup partnered with Lumina Foundation to explore the specific facets shaping Americans' trust in colleges and universities. Among the 42% of U.S. adults who are highly confident in higher education, respondents most often cite the inherent value of being educated (30%); the benefits of being taught critical thinking and exposure to diverse viewpoints (24%); the quality of American higher education (17%); and the opportunities having a degree creates (16%).

By contrast, the 23% of Americans who express little or no confidence in higher education mention several reasons for their skepticism, though three notably outpace the others: the politicization of campuses (38%); not focusing on "the right things," such as not learning job-relevant skills (32%); and cost and expenses, including high tuition prices and loan burdens (24%).

While these concerns are leading skeptics of higher education to question the value of a degree or the intentions of the institutions awarding them, currently enrolled college students report markedly different experiences.

Based on responses from nearly 4,000 associate and bachelor's degree students and nearly 6,000 college graduates, the Lumina-Gallup 2026 [State of Higher Education](#) study finds that sizable majorities of students say their institution and faculty members encourage open dialogue and support diverse viewpoints, they are confident that their degree will lead to their desired career outcomes, and they believe the benefits of that degree still outpace the rising — and even unfair — tuition costs. These views vary far less by political affiliation and demographic subgroups than the general public's confidence in higher education. College graduates likewise largely report that the outcomes students hope to achieve after graduation typically come to fruition.

Key Findings From the 2026 *State of Higher Education* Study Include:

- 1** **Between 64% and 74% of Democratic, Republican and independent students** say all or most of their professors encourage students to share their views and support speakers and audiences alike during controversial discussions.
- 2** **Just 2% of all college students, including 3% of Republicans,** say they feel they don't belong on their campus due to their political views.
- 3** **Roughly nine in 10 college students are confident that their coursework** is teaching them career-relevant skills and that their degree will help them secure a job after graduation.
- 4** **About nine in 10 bachelor's (93%) and associate degree students (89%)** believe that the overall investment they are making in college is worth it, and about three-quarters of students and college graduates agree that their degree is or has been worth the cost.
- 5** **Three-quarters of college graduates say their degree has been "critical" or "important"** to their career success, and most recent bachelor's (80%) and associate degree (62%) graduates secured a good job within one year of graduation.
- 6** **Just over half of college students (57%)** say four-year universities do not charge fair prices, while 25% say the same of two-year colleges.

Detailed Findings

About seven in 10 students, regardless of political party, feel they belong on campus and say their institution facilitates open dialogue.

Compared to the prior year, concerns about the politicization of college campuses increased notably in 2025. Among U.S. adults who lack confidence in higher education, 38% cite concerns about indoctrination, propaganda or universities and faculty pushing an agenda — particularly liberal ideals — a 10-point increase over 2024. However, students themselves do not report widespread limits on free speech, and the share who feel uncomfortable sharing their opinions on campus is similar among Democratic and Republican students.

Two-thirds of currently enrolled college students say all or most of their faculty members actively encourage students to share their views, even if it makes others uncomfortable. This percentage is slightly higher among students in disciplines most likely to broach controversial social and political topics during their studies, such as the social sciences (70%) and humanities (71%).

Students are equally likely to say all or most of their professors create a classroom environment that supports not only those who express unpopular opinions but also students who may feel uncomfortable or upset by those views (both at 71%).

CHART 1

Students' Views About Open Dialogue on Their Campus

Thinking about the instructors you have had at [Institution], how many have:

■ % All of them ■ % Most of them ■ % Some of them ■ % Only a few of them ■ % None of them

Encouraged students to share their views, even if it might make others in the class uncomfortable



Created a safe environment for students who might be upset by what someone else says in class



Created a safe environment for students who express opinions that are not shared by most other students



Note: Percentages under 3% are not displayed.

Moreover, students from both sides of the political aisle report similar experiences: Between 67% and 74% of Democrats and Republicans say all or most of their faculty members encourage students to share their views and support speakers and listeners during those discussions. Independent students are slightly less likely than Democratic students, and about as likely as Republicans, to report that their faculty members encourage students to share their views.

CHART 2

Students' Views About Open Dialogue on Their Campus by Political Party Identification

Thinking about the instructors you have had at [Institution], how many have:

% All of them + Most of them

■ Democrat ■ Independent ■ Republican

Encouraged students to share their views, even if it might make others in the class uncomfortable



Created a safe environment for students who might be upset by what someone else says in class



Created a safe environment for students who express opinions that are not shared by most other students



Similarly, 70% of college students, including 76% of Democrats and 69% of Republicans, agree that they can express their opinions freely on campus. While this means three in 10 college students are somewhat reticent to share their views, the issue is not limited to college campuses; it may reflect the current state of wider political discourse in the United States. For example, in May 2024, Gallup found that 57% of American workers sometimes avoid sharing their political views at work for fear of harassment or poor treatment.

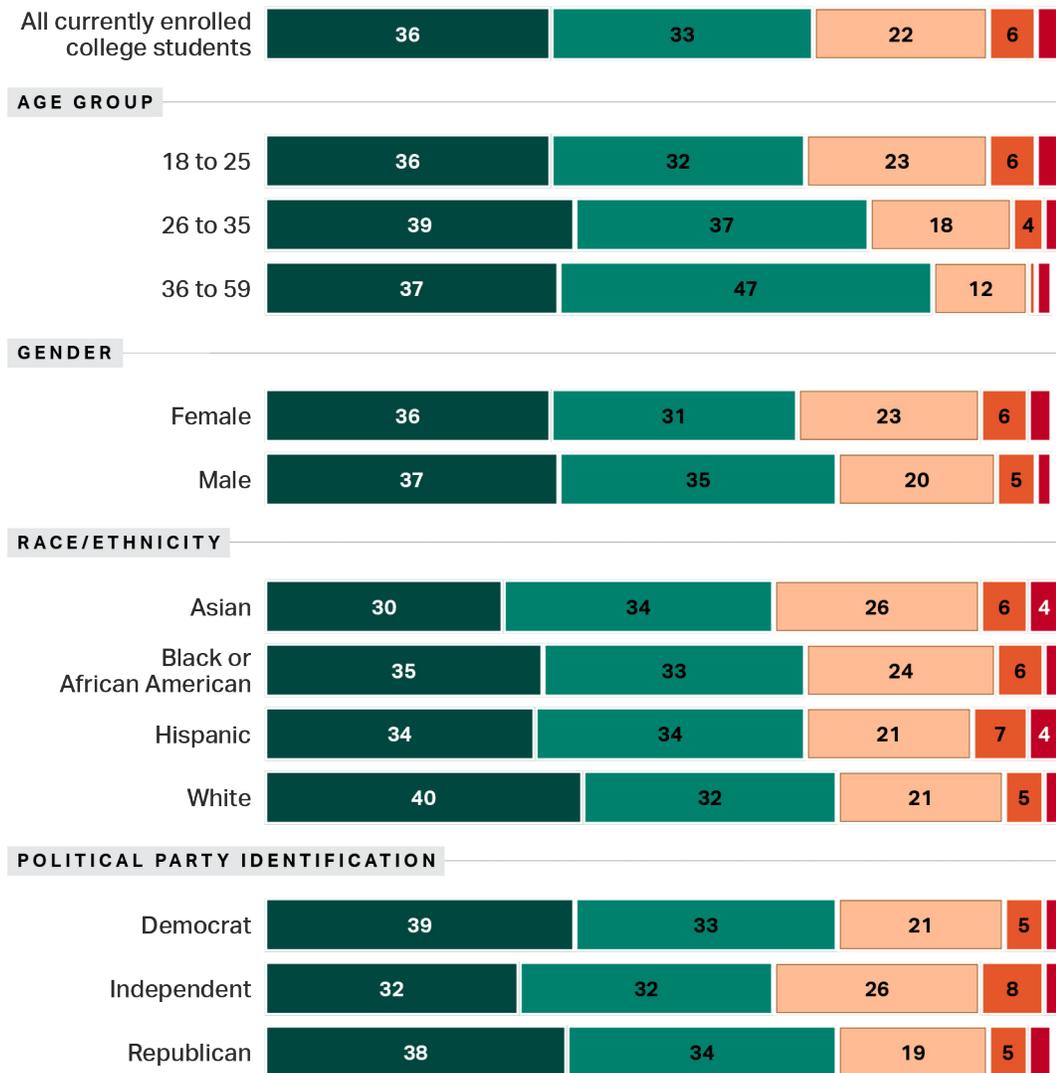
A similar percentage of students (69%) agree that they feel like they belong on their campus, compared to just 9% who disagree. This percentage varies only minimally across students' gender, race and political party.

CHART 3

Students' Feelings of Belonging at Their Institution by Demographic Groups

You feel as if you belong at [Institution].

■ % Strongly agree ■ % 4 ■ % 3 ■ % 2 ■ % Strongly disagree



Note: Percentages under 4% are not displayed. Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

This lack of belonging stems from several sources. Students who feel they do not belong on campus are most likely to say their own personality type (50%) or a mental health condition (30%) is the source of their isolation, representing about 4% and 3% of all college students, respectively. Meanwhile, just two in 10 students who feel they don't belong (21%) — or approximately 2% of all college students — say their political views have made them feel alienated on campus.

Notably, this sentiment does not vary by political party: 3% of all Republican students say they feel like they don't belong on campus because of their political views, compared to 1% of Democrats and 2% of independents.

About nine in 10 students are learning career-relevant skills in college; three-quarters of graduates say their degree has been important to their career success.

After campus politicization, Americans who lack confidence in higher education most often point to concerns about degree relevance and graduates' employment prospects. However, in addition to consistent evidence that college graduates have lower unemployment rates,¹ are more likely to work in jobs that align with their strengths and interests and earn more over the course of their lifetimes² than high school graduates, students are highly confident that their degree will lead to their desired career outcomes.

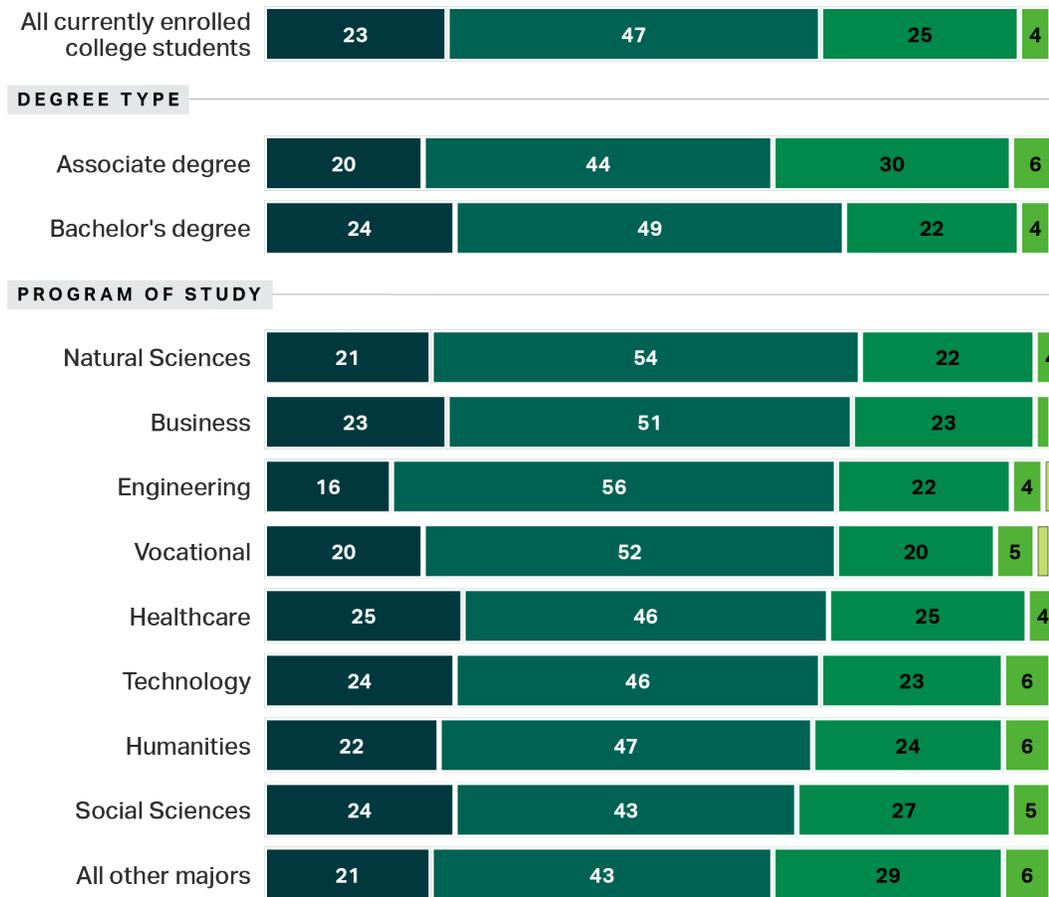
- 1 *Unemployment rates for people 25 years and older by educational attainment.* (n.d.). Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved February 1, 2026, from <https://www.bls.gov/charts/employment-situation/unemployment-rates-for-persons-25-years-and-older-by-educational-attainment.htm>
- 2 Morris, C., Cheah, B., & Strohl, J. (2025). *The major payoff: Evaluating earnings and employment outcomes across bachelor's degrees.* Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce. https://cew.georgetown.edu/wp-content/uploads/cew-the_major_payoff.pdf

Overall, seven in 10 college students say the quality of the education they are receiving is “excellent” (23%) or “very good” (47%). This percentage varies only slightly across academic disciplines; however, bachelor’s degree students are nine points more likely than associate degree students to say the quality of their education is at least very good (73% vs. 64%).

CHART 4
How Current Students Rate the Quality of Their Education

Which of the following best describes the quality of the education you are currently receiving in your program?

■ % Excellent ■ % Very good ■ % Good ■ % Fair ■ % Poor



Note: Percentages under 4% are not displayed. Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100% or may sum to ± 1.

Students' confidence in the quality of their program's curriculum translates into an even stronger belief that the degree they are pursuing is adequately preparing them for their postgraduate careers. The overwhelming majority of associate and bachelor's degree students are at least somewhat confident that their degree will not only teach them the skills they will need to get the kind of job they want (93%) but will also help them obtain that job after they graduate (88%). Nearly half of these students are "very confident" in those outcomes (47% and 44%, respectively).

These percentages are generally similar across academic programs, though students studying technology (82%) and humanities (81%) are slightly less confident than the average student that their degree will secure them a post-graduation job. Bachelor's degree students are only slightly more confident that they are learning relevant skills (94%) and will get their desired post-graduation job (90%) than their peers in associate degree programs (90% and 85%, respectively).

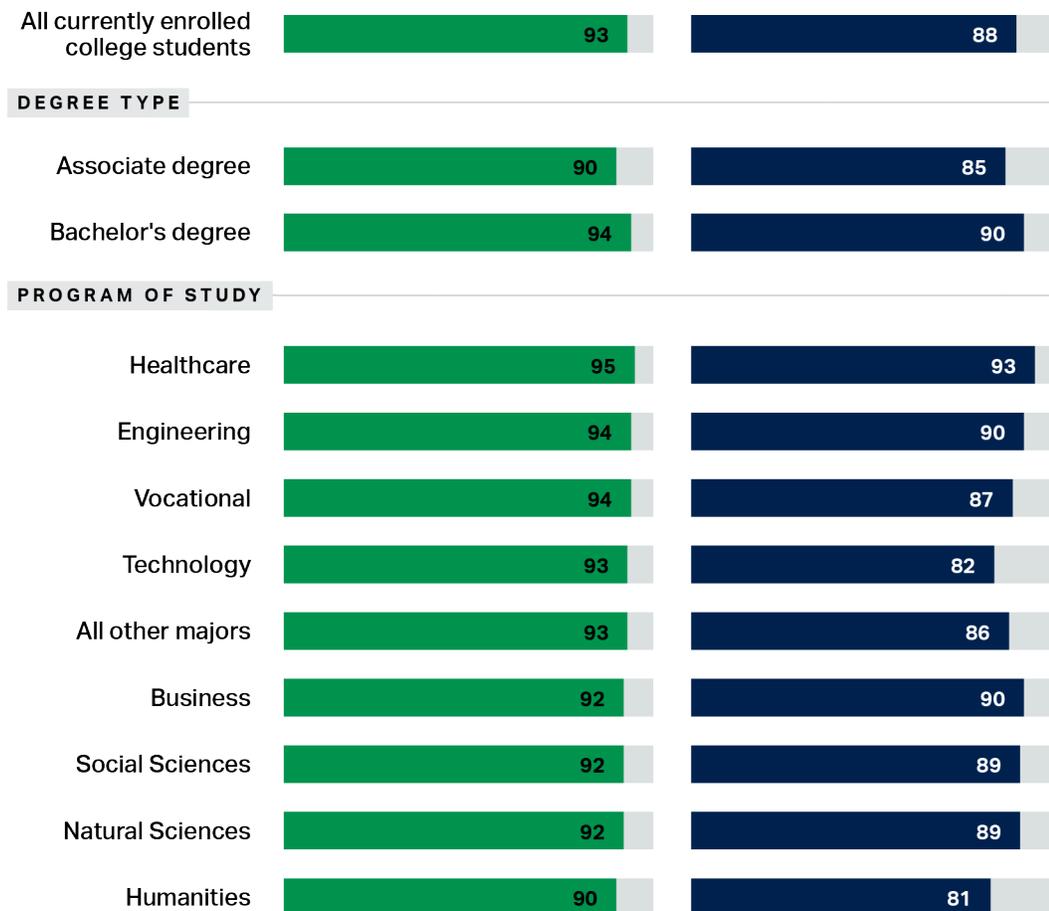
CHART 5

Students' Confidence in Their Degree or Credential by Program of Study

How confident are you that the degree or credential you are working towards will:

% Very confident + Confident

■ Teach you skills you need to get the type of job you want ■ Help you get a job when you graduate



Career outcomes reported by college graduates reinforce the value many students place on earning a degree. Three-quarters of graduates say their degree has been “critical” (37%) or “important” (38%) to reaching their career goals, with this assessment especially high among bachelor’s degree holders (80%) compared to those who hold an associate degree (56%). Additionally, between 73% and 88% of graduates across nearly every discipline say their degree has been critical or important to their career success; graduates in the arts are a notable exception (55%).

Moreover, most recent graduates matriculated into quality jobs relatively quickly. Eighty percent of bachelor’s degree graduates who received their degree within the past 10 years say they obtained a good job within one year of graduation, including 42% who say a good job was waiting for them as soon as they graduated. Recent associate degree graduates are somewhat less likely to have quickly secured a post-graduation job: 62% had a good job within one year, and 30% obtained that job immediately after graduation.

Students and alumni clearly endorse the investment in — if not the cost of — a college degree.

The third most frequently cited reason for low confidence in higher education is the cost of tuition and student loans. In contrast to concerns regarding political polarization and career relevance, students broadly agree that the cost of college is not only unaffordable but even unfair to many hoping to pursue a degree. Still, even as they acknowledge the barrier posed by tuition and loans, students and alumni also agree that a college degree is worth the sometimes-steep investment.

Two- and four-year college students overwhelmingly agree that the investment they are making in their degree is worthwhile (89% and 93%, respectively). But when asked explicitly whether the *cost* of their degree is worth it, students are somewhat less likely to agree (75%).



College graduates express similar attitudes toward the cost of their degrees. About seven in 10 associate (70%) and bachelor’s degree holders (72%) say the education they received was worth the cost, while just 13% and 11%, respectively, feel their degree was not worth the investment. Moreover, graduates above the age of 35 — most of whom have had more time to reap the benefits of the degree than their younger peers — are most likely to say their degree has been worth the cost.

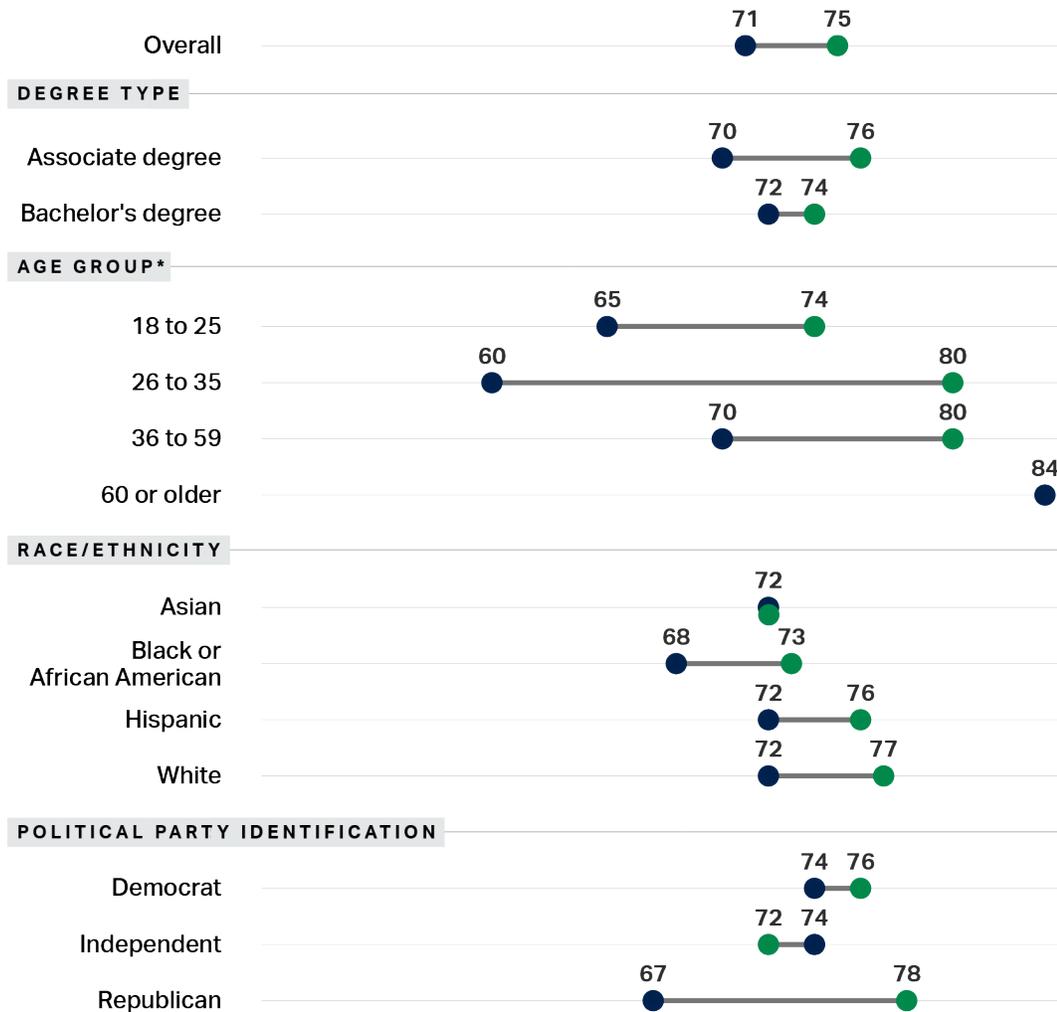
CHART 6

Views on Whether Higher Education Is/Was Worth the Cost by Demographic Groups

The education I [am receiving/received] from [Institution] [is/was] worth the cost.

% Strongly agree + Agree

■ Currently enrolled college students ■ College graduates



*Student sample does not include adults aged 60 years old or older.

However, despite strong beliefs in the *value* of a college education, concerns about its *affordability* are widespread among currently enrolled students. While 93% of students believe a degree from a community college is “very” or “somewhat” affordable, far fewer say the same of a bachelor’s degree from any type of four-year institution.

With costs across different types of institutions varying widely — particularly between private, not-for-profit universities and public universities, which typically offer discounted tuition to in-state residents — students draw distinctions in the affordability of different types of four-year institutions. Three in 10 students believe private, not-for-profit schools are very or somewhat affordable, compared to 51% who say the same of public, flagship universities. Public, non-flagship colleges are perceived as the most affordable four-year institutions, with nearly two-thirds of students rating them as at least somewhat affordable.

CHART 7

Perceived Affordability of Higher Education Institutions Among Current Students

How affordable do you think each of the following institutions or programs are?

■ % Very affordable ■ % Somewhat affordable ■ % Somewhat unaffordable ■ % Very unaffordable



Note: Percentages under 3% are not displayed. Due to rounding, percentages may not sum to 100%.

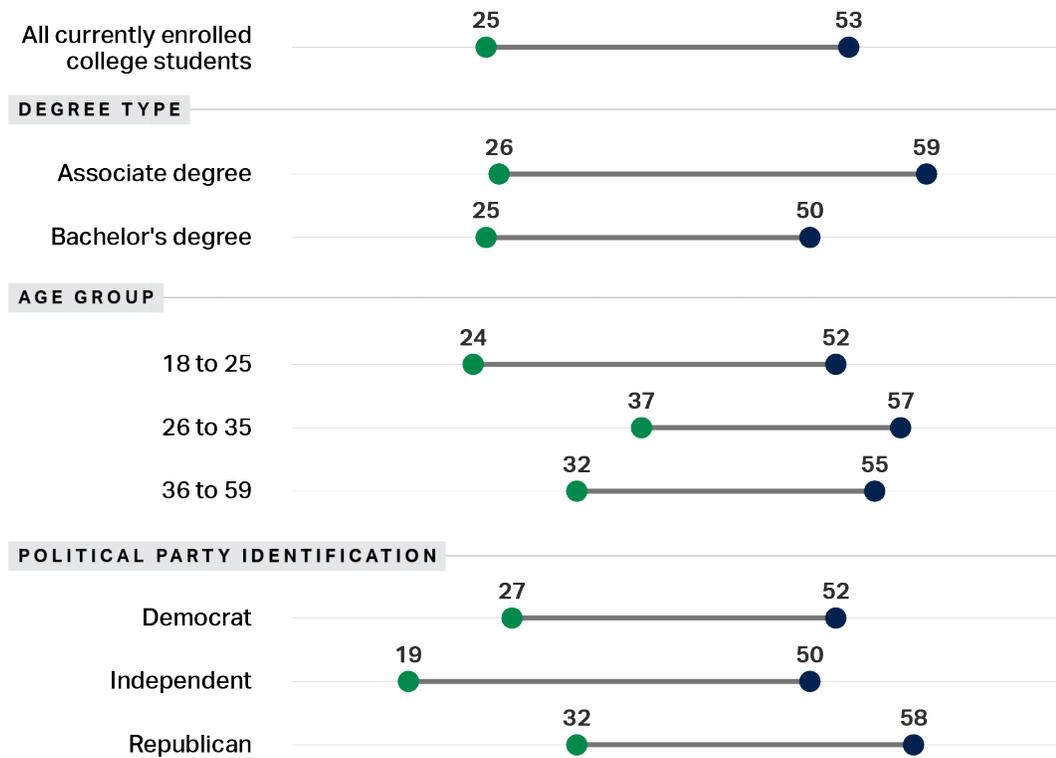
Perceptions of the cost of college extend beyond questions of affordability into matters of fairness. One in four students say four-year colleges charge fair prices, while over half (57%) say they do not. Meanwhile, students are about twice as likely to say community colleges charge fair, rather than unfair, prices (53% vs. 25%).

CHART 8
Perceived Fairness of the Cost of Two- vs. Four-Year Colleges by Demographic Groups

Do you think ____ charge fair prices for what they offer students and graduates?

% Yes

■ Four-year colleges ■ Two-year colleges



Implications

College students and alumni report that several of the concerns eroding Americans' trust in higher education are likely less pervasive than its detractors might believe.

Students who do not feel comfortable speaking freely on campus are relatively small in number and are not disproportionately from any one political party or background.

About nine in 10 college students are confident that their degree will lead to their desired career outcomes, and three-quarters of graduates say their degree has played an important role in achieving their post-graduation career goals.

Nine in 10 students say their total investment in college is worthwhile, and three-quarters of students and graduates agree that their degree is or has been worth the cost.



While outside criticism of higher education may not reflect the experiences of most students today, that does not imply there is no room for improvement on campuses.

Cost remains a pervasive, rising barrier to the many benefits of a degree program.

One in 10 college students lacks a sense of belonging on campus, potentially jeopardizing their likelihood of persisting and completing their program.

One in five college graduates does not secure a good job within a year of graduation.

While these outcomes may be outliers, the implications for individual graduates who have invested significant time and money for limited benefits can be disastrous. Moreover, these deeply personal, negative experiences may carry outsized influence in conversations these graduates have with friends, family and colleagues about the benefits of college — even if they do not represent the most likely outcome. Colleges and universities can strengthen public confidence by clearly communicating graduates' success stories while continuing to address student concerns about free expression, belonging and the value of their educational investment.



Methodology

Lumina Foundation-Gallup State of Higher Education Study

Results for the Lumina-Gallup study are based on web surveys conducted from Oct. 2-31, 2025, with samples of 6,010 students who are currently enrolled in a postsecondary education program (certificate, associate or bachelor's degree), 5,052 adults who were previously enrolled in a postsecondary education program but had not completed an associate or bachelor's degree, and 3,000 adults who had never enrolled in a postsecondary education program. This includes 3,801 adults who say they are currently pursuing an associate or bachelor's degree.

All respondents were between the ages of 18 and 59 and had a high school diploma or equivalent, but not an associate or bachelor's degree. Respondents were interviewed via Dynata's non-probability web-based panel.

The data are weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region for the population of U.S. adults aged 18 to 59 with a high school diploma but without a college degree. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent American Community Survey figures.

Gallup Alumni Survey

Results for the Gallup Alumni Survey are based on web surveys from respondents who received an associate or bachelor's degree, are aged 18 or older, have internet access and live in one of the 50 U.S. states or the District of Columbia. Results were collected Nov. 10-Dec. 1, 2025, and include 1,266 associate degree graduates and 4,667 bachelor's degree graduates.

The Gallup Alumni Survey was conducted via web in English using the Gallup Panel[®]. The sample is weighted to correct for unequal selection probability and nonresponse. The data are also weighted to match national demographics of gender, age, race, Hispanic ethnicity, education and region. Demographic weighting targets are based on the most recent Current Population Survey figures.

For the total sample of 5,933 college graduates, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.4 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 1,266 associate degree graduates, the margin of sampling error is ± 3.2 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. For the sample of 4,667 bachelor's degree graduates, the margin of sampling error is ± 1.6 percentage points at the 95% confidence level. All reported margins of sampling error for the Gallup Alumni Survey include the computed design effects for weighting. Margins of error for subgroups are higher.

In addition to sampling error, question wording and practical difficulties in conducting surveys can introduce error or bias into the findings of public opinion polls.

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